

Reading Gramsci

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Reading Gramsci

By

Francisco Fernández Buey

Translated by

Nicholas Gray



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Prologue

The studies included in this volume expand, develop ideas from, and occasionally correct what I wrote on the work of Antonio Gramsci between 1973 and 1975, which was compiled in *Ensayos sobre Gramsci* (Barcelona: Editorial Materiales, 1978). Those essays were based on a reading of Gramsci before the publication of the critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* produced by Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

In the intervening period (i.e. up to the year 2000), many previously unpublished items from Gramsci's correspondence with Giulia and Tatiana Schucht, his wife and his sister-in-law (who was the person closest to Gramsci between 1927 and 1937) have come to light, along with a considerable number of documents which illuminate little-known aspects of his biography and permit a better interpretation of certain obscure passages from the *Prison Notebooks*. Among these latter documents, it is the correspondence between Piero Sraffa and Tatiana Schucht, published in 1991, which is of the greatest importance for an appreciation of Antonio Gramsci's evolution during the prison years.

Moreover, Gramscian studies have grown exponentially across the world, partly as a consequence of this newly available documentation. In the final third of the twentieth century, Gramsci went from being 'fashionable' (a status conferred upon him by a certain politicism of the 1970s) to being studied as a classic political thinker. Politicos stopped citing his name in vain, and opportunists discovered that his name could no longer be used for their daily business ventures. By contrast, Gramsci's intellectual influence has been consolidated among serious people engaged in the social sciences, cultural studies and the critique of politics. The same is true, of course, for those who appreciate truthfulness in politics; people who, with the vagaries of time, have become those with the closest connection to what used to be called 'revolutionary spirit'.

It is true that there is no longer any talk of the contemporary relevance of Gramsci, but this is an advantage for an appreciation of his work, which was never 'of contemporary relevance' in the trivial sense usually given to this phrase by the dominant culture industry. In Gramsci there are no formulae. In the majority of his writings, there are 'unsparing truths' which already in his time piqued autocrats, conformist intellectuals and devotees of catechisms. The demagogues of the era decreed that this was a brain which should be prevented from continuing to think; the learned members of the establishment ignored him on the basis that he was not an expert in anything which would have given him a title (he was neither a professional philosopher, nor a historian of a certain school, nor a sociology graduate, nor a posing intellectual,

nor a rising politician); and the followers of doctrine felt uncomfortable in his presence and ostracised him on account of his irony, his self-critical tendencies, or what they called 'his antinomies'. As such, the best Gramsci will always have been a posthumous author.

Such an author would reject any attempt to make a hagiography out of his life and his work, even as a corrective to the oblivion to which he had been condemned. He considered all of his mature writings to be a 'first approximation', irrespective of the theme under consideration (whether this was the history of Italian intellectuals, political theory, the knowledge of the structure of *Inferno*, Canto X of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the interpretation of Machiavelli, or the evolution of Americanism). On several occasions, he wrote that he had the impression that he had gone astray in his life. However, on none of these occasions did he say that he had gone astray in those things that earned him the criticism of despots, starchy academics and the upholders of orthodoxy.

Anyone reading Gramsci today will probably reach the conclusion that he was wrong in some important things that he considered to be certainties, in some of his convictions that he deemed well-founded or that he thought would be borne out. I am also of this opinion. I think that he was wrong on some things, which, decades later, others of us continue to consider important, and on which we continue to be wrong, perhaps like Gramsci himself. However, I also consider it a pity that he was wrong in his predictions about what could have been a great moral and intellectual reform in the vast and terrible world of the twentieth century, because the descendants of those who were proved right in opposition to Gramsci have not left us with a better world. Accordingly, something similar to what Brecht said of good people could be stated with regard to Gramsci: even when they take the wrong path at a crossroads, they make us think what might have been the right one. That there might yet be a path, even an oblique one, to a regulated and peaceful society of equals, like the one that Gramsci wanted, no longer depends on the Italian thinker. It depends on us, the readers of Gramsci in the current epoch. That is, an epoch of post-Fordism, the fragmentation of the working class, the inducement of cultural uniformity, the society of the spectacle, neo-slavery, and rampant prostitution – the rampant prostitution of the daughters and granddaughters of those who expected so much from moral and intellectual reform, but also from an epoch of protest against imperial globalisation.

Gramsci chose to see the philosophy of praxis as a heresy of the 'religion of freedom', of the liberalism of the nineteenth century and of part of the twentieth. Furthermore, he sensed that the democratic and lay philosopher of the future would precisely have to confront the religion of freedom by deepening the sense of this heresy. That other great lone theorist, Simone Weil, was

thinking something not too different in France, in a different linguistic register, but with a similar sensibility vis-à-vis the misfortunes of the poor. It is no coincidence, then, that the names of Gramsci and Simone Weil should frequently appear together in the Latin America of today when thoughts turn once again to the liberation of the exploited, the oppressed and the destitute.

One of the great errors at the turn of the century has been the generalised, uncritical acceptance of what has erroneously been called ‘neoliberalism’, which has as little to do with historic liberalism as has Machiavellianism with the historic Machiavelli, or some of the Marxisms with the historic Marx. This generalised acceptance of ‘neoliberalism’ is creating such confusion in our societies that the very word ‘freedom’ runs the risk of converting itself into a discredited concept, so identified is it with the freedom of the market and the free circulation of commodities, while the free movement of those human beings who find themselves obliged to emigrate is curtailed. The only commodity that is denied the freedom of circulation nowadays is precisely ‘the commodity’ into which capitalism has – according to Marx – converted the human being.

The fact that this is being done precisely in the name of ‘liberalism’ lends an extra significance to Gramsci’s reflections, in his last prison notebooks, on the lay and democratic philosopher in a critical dialogue with the ‘religion of freedom’. These notes of his were also tentative, a ‘first approximation’, but, in their brevity and fragmentedness, there are some suggestions that ought to help us give a new value to the word ‘freedom’ in the present. This is of course to be done by taking the heretical intent further, to continue speaking like Gramsci, and with Gramsci. This would necessitate a shaking off of mental cobwebs and an intellectual effort in order to call the things which are ranged under the heading ‘neoliberalism’ by their true name: capitalism, which not only commodifies and exploits the human being, as it did in Gramsci’s time, but also speculates with what the worker produces, metamorphoses these products into assets on the stock exchange, spreading the contagion of speculation to the workers themselves, and enslaves or prostitutes the surplus population – i.e. all those girls, boys, women and men who no longer find a place within the legal regulation of the international division of labour within the Empire. Instead of seeing ‘neoliberalism’ as a mere extension of historic liberalism, this alternative characterisation of the status quo, of how things are in the globalised world, would certainly facilitate a fruitful dialogue with the heirs of historic liberalism, who, like Piero Gobetti, the editor of *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, were able to appreciate the thought and action of Gramsci, and, through them, with all those true liberals who discovered some time ago that, in this world, it is not enough to be liberal: we have to be *libertarian* at the least.

In this final paragraph I must declare, albeit indirectly, an intellectual debt to the two people from whom I learned most about Gramsci: Valentino Gerratana and Manuel Sacristán. The above comments and the arguments of the following four essays owe much to these two scholars' way of reading Gramsci. Between the lines, I am in dialogue with what they wrote on Gramsci, for which I have the same gratitude as when they were alive and they taught us how to engage with the classical thinker who remains so close to our ideals in spite of the time which has passed since the *Prison Notebooks* were written.

The four essays included in this volume are the reworking of four interventions of mine at Gramsci conferences held in Italy (in Sardinia, in Turin and in Trieste) between 1987 and 2000. They would not have progressed beyond the spoken word without the generosity of Antonio A. Santucci, Giorgio Baratta, Guido Liguori, Alberto Burgio and Giuseppe Petronio. I would like to express my gratitude to all of them here for their kindness in inviting me to those conferences, and in making bibliographical suggestions.

Barcelona, August 2001

[**Translator's note:** here and there in the text, Francisco Fernández Buey's notes are supplemented by my own. These latter can be identified by a dagger (†).]

If one wishes to study the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder (and one furthermore whose essential coherence is to be sought not in each individual writing or series of writings but in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work in which the elements of the conception are implicit) some preliminary detailed philological work has to be done. This has to be carried out with the most scrupulous accuracy, scientific honesty and intellectual loyalty and without any preconceptions, apriorism or *parti pris*. It is necessary, first of all, to reconstruct the process of intellectual development of the thinker in question in order to identify those elements which were to become stable and 'permanent' – in other words those which were taken up as the thinker's own thought, distinct from and superior to the 'material' which he had studied earlier and which served as a stimulus to him. It is only the former elements which are essential aspects of the process of development...

It is a matter of common observation among all scholars, from personal experience, that any new theory studied with 'heroic fury' (that is, studied not out of mere external curiosity but for reasons of deep interest) for a certain period, especially if one is young, attracts the student of its own accord and takes possession of his whole personality, only to be limited by the study of the next theory, until such time as a critical equilibrium is created and one learns to study deeply but without succumbing to the fascination of the system and the author under study. These observations are all the more valid the more the thinker in question is endowed with a violent impetus, has a polemical character and is lacking in *esprit de système*, or when one is dealing with a personality in whom theoretical and practical activity are indissolubly intertwined and with an intellect in a process of continual creation and perpetual movement, with a strong and mercilessly vigorous sense of self-criticism.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI, 'Quistioni di metodo', Notebook 16, §2, in *Quaderni del carcere*, volume 2, edited by Valentino Gerratana, pp. 1840–11. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 382–3.*

* Further references to Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere* (and where these exist, to published English translations) will use the following notation: e.g. Q.16, §2 for Notebook 16, note 2.

Love and Revolution

In Vienna . . . I'll bury my soul in a scrapbook,
With the photographs there and the moss.
And I'll yield to the flood of your beauty,
My cheap violin and my cross. . . .
O my love, o my love
Take this waltz, take this waltz,
It's yours now. It's all that there is.

LEONARD COHEN sings 'Little Viennese Waltz' by Federico García Lorca

Epistolaries

The best way to become acquainted with Gramsci's intimate life is, of course, to immerse oneself in his correspondence. Anyone wishing to do so with sensitivity and respect for the tragedy of the man will, as a preliminary, have to overcome two reservations of Gramsci's own.

The first is that many of the letters which he wrote from prison had to pass via the censor: he was aware of this, and knew that, in a certain sense, this made them 'public'; as a consequence, he became even more emotionally reserved (a trait for which he was already known) in his correspondence during those years (1927–33), and occasionally adopted the language of Aesop. In order to decipher this language, the scholar and the attentive reader will sometimes be obliged to turn to other sources, namely the testimonies of relatives and friends inside and outside prison.

The second reservation has to do with an explicit declaration made by Gramsci in some of his letters from prison, echoing something he had already expressed prior to his imprisonment: he felt an irrepressible aversion to written correspondence.

From these two circumstances together, the non-informed reader might hastily surmise that the available material will be scarce and that very few references will be found in the preserved letters to the private life of a man whose principal engagement from his twenties onwards was politics. However, the reality of the matter is somewhat different. Around 700 letters written by Gramsci have been preserved. Of these, almost 200 were written between his years as a student (in Cagliari and in Turin) and the autumn of 1926, which is

when he was arrested by the fascist police. Another 500 were composed from the various prisons and clinics that he passed through as a political prisoner until his death in 1937.

The great majority of the letters written by Gramsci from Cagliari and Turin, between 1908 and 1914, are addressed to family members – to his parents and sisters. Between 1914 and 1919, this correspondence declined, and his letters to his family became very sporadic. Very few letters have been preserved from the revolutionary *biennio rosso* of 1919–20. In these years of great political activity, Gramsci would probably have been in direct contact with the majority of the people that he wanted to communicate with: members of factory councils and comrades from *L'Ordine Nuovo*. However, it is certain that he wrote more letters, especially with a political and trade-union content, than those that have been preserved. In any case, his correspondence increased in volume and became much more interesting from the time of his stay in Moscow in 1922, when he met Giulia Schucht, during the five months that he lived in Vienna working for the Communist Party of Italy in the Communist International, and then, on returning to Italy, during his time in Rome (from May 1923 to November 1926). The correspondence from Moscow (November 1922 to November 1923) and above all from Vienna (until May 1924) and Rome (1924–6) accounts for approximately two-thirds of all of the letters that Gramsci wrote before his arrest and imprisonment.

Almost 500 letters written by Gramsci between November 1926 and 1937, a few months before his death, have been preserved. Although these letters are customarily known as the ‘prison letters’, not all of them were strictly speaking written from the various prisons to which Gramsci was transferred after his arrest. A few of them were composed during his exile on the island of Ustica, where he was sent along with other antifascist militants while he awaited trial and where he lived under surveillance in a private house (December 1926–January 1927). Many others were written from the clinics to which Gramsci was admitted when he was already seriously ill, from the end of 1933 onwards: the clinic of Doctor Cusumano, in Formia (from December 1933 to August 1935), and the Quisisana clinic in Rome, where he remained on parole until just before his death in April 1937. Of this total of almost 500 letters, the majority of those written from the prison in Turi de Bari were addressed to Gramsci’s sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht (some of these were intended for Giulia as well and others were meant to be read by Piero Sraffa, Gramsci’s friend who was an economist and who was acting as an intermediary with the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy); many are addressed to Giulia Schucht, and to their two sons, Delio and Giuliano (who were both with their mother in Moscow). A much smaller part of Gramsci’s correspondence from this period consists

of letters to his mother (who died in Ghilarza in December 1932, although Gramsci was not informed of her death until quite a long time after), to his brother Carlo, and to other relatives.

For obvious reasons (taking into account the charge on which Gramsci had been tried and imprisoned, and the banning of the Communist Party of Italy by Mussolini's fascist regime), Gramsci could hardly write directly to his political friends from prison. Almost all the letters that he wrote to them between 1927 and 1935 have been lost. From 1934 onwards, Gramsci's letters to his main correspondent, Tatiana Schucht, tapered off in number given that she and Piero Sraffa could visit him regularly in the clinic, such that almost all the letters from that date until 1937 are addressed to the members of his family who lived in the USSR, to his wife and sons.

It is on these letters (and on numerous testimonies) that the two most complete biographies of Antonio Gramsci published to this date are based, by Giuseppe Fiori and Aurelio Lepre respectively.¹ Fiori's beautiful 1970s portrait of the figure of Gramsci is as precise as it is sensitive. His biography contains the essentials for an appreciation of Gramsci's personality and the circumstances that shaped it. It should be remembered, however, that the editions of Gramsci's correspondence which can be considered practically definitive were published later, in the 1990s, and that these editions include various items which are relevant for a better understanding of various aspects of Gramsci's personality that have been the subject of some controversy; they also afford an insight into his relationship with the people that he loved most, and with the leading group of the Communist Party of Italy between 1926 and 1937. Lepre's biography takes this newly discovered material into account and incorporates the results of the investigative work carried out by other authors (principally Paolo Spriano, Valentino Gerratana, Antonio A. Santucci and Aldo Natoli)² on the last years of Gramsci's life. In essays published in recent decades, Fiori himself has qualified and brought up to date some of the hypotheses contained in his biography in relation to both Gramsci's opinions on communist politics after 1926, and the complicated and sometimes bitter relationships that he maintained with his loved ones from prison.³

1 Fiori 1966, 1990; Lepre 1998. Fiori's biography has been reprinted several times in Italy, and has been translated into the majority of European languages. Lepre's biography incorporates letters, documents and testimonies which have come to light in the last decades, and which clarify some previously unresolved questions in relation to Gramsci's thinking between 1926 and 1937.

2 For more details on these studies, see 'Guide to reading Gramsci' in this volume.

3 Fiori 1991a.

From 1908 to 1926

The most complete compilation of letters written by Antonio Gramsci up to 1926 appeared at the beginning of the 1990s.⁴ The editor of this correspondence, Antonio A. Santucci, observed at the time that these letters were relatively few in number for a period of almost twenty years, above all if a comparison is made to the number of letters written in the ten years which followed his arrest. Naturally, this difference can be largely explained by the change in the circumstances of Gramsci's life: not as many letters are written by someone who is studying or immersed in the maelstrom of political events, as by someone alone and isolated in prison. On the other hand, it would seem that we have to reconcile ourselves to the idea that some of the letters written by Gramsci, above all in the period of the weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo* between 1919 and 1920, have been definitively lost, since only one letter is known to have been preserved from this period, written to Serrati in February 1920. The same goes for some of the letters written between 1922 and 1923, while Gramsci was living in Moscow and Vienna.

Thus there are important gaps in this correspondence, above all between 1914 and 1926. Ten years ago, Santucci thought that some of these gaps, corresponding to the period between 1922 and 1926, could perhaps be filled through investigations in the archives of the former Soviet Union, but it would seem that no substantial items in this regard have been discovered to date. Moreover, the letters Gramsci wrote as a student (in Cagliari and, above all, in Turin), do not reveal much about the formation of his character and the figure that he was to become. Until 1913, these letters are mostly a chronicle of complaints to his father (and to his family in general) – the complaints of an impoverished student who depends on a scholarship and on help from his loved ones for his subsistence. In these letters, we learn that he suffers from the cold and from hunger in the industrial city; that he finds himself obliged to change his lodgings for lack of money; that he endures constant headaches; that he finds it hard to adapt to his surroundings; furthermore, that he needs help and is unable to find it. The impression one gets on reading this correspondence is that the young Gramsci has an important emotional bond with his mother and that, complaints apart, he only finds one thread which connects him to those who have remained on the island: the language they speak, his interest in words and their history, which is reinforced by the suggestions which he receives in Turin from Professor Matteo Bartoli in relation to the Sardinian dialect. Accordingly, when Gramsci establishes other political and cultural

4 Gramsci 1992a.

connections in and around the university, he breaks off his somewhat strained correspondence with his family.

There is only one letter from those years in which Gramsci lays himself bare: it is dated 1916 and addressed to Gramsci's sister, Grazietta. This letter, written after a very long silence, gives an idea of the dimensions of the crisis that the university student had gone through between 1913 and 1915: 'For a couple of years I lived outside the world, almost as if in a dream. One by one, I let all the threads connecting me to the world and to people be severed. I lived exclusively for my brain, leaving nothing for my heart. This was undoubtedly because my head was suffering so much, I always had headaches, and I ended up thinking of nothing else but my head'.⁵ Here we see Gramsci use turns of phrase and expressions relating to his character which he would often reiterate subsequently in his correspondence with Giulia and Tatiana Schucht – he feels, inside and out, like a bear in a cavern, or a wolf in its cave, reacting to physical pain and to solitude by immersing himself in intellectual and political work.

It is apparent from what Gramsci wrote in the various socialist publications in which he collaborated between 1914 and 1920 (he gave up his university studies in early 1915), as well as from some subsequent autobiographical reflections, that he managed to find his *milieu*, partially emerging from the isolation in which he initially lived in Turin, and made friends (in some cases, lifelong ones, as with Piero Sraffa, for example). However there is hardly any trace of this in the few surviving letters from this period. It was already the case then that Gramsci's journalistic and political activity did not leave him any time for the communication of his feelings through letters. As a result, his correspondence hardly gives any insight into how he grew as a man during the years of the First World War. In order to get an idea of this development, it is necessary either to turn to the testimonies of those people who were close to him in Turin, or to establish hypotheses on the basis of a few passages from his contributions to *Il Grido del Popolo*, *Avanti*, *La città futura* and *L'Ordine Nuovo*, or indeed to do both these things.

The situation changes with Gramsci's journey to Moscow in December 1922. In comparison, the letters that he wrote from then until 1926 are much more numerous. There were two determining factors for this. The first was his intimate relationship with Giulia Schucht, their nascent love. The second was that, living in Vienna as an official of the Comintern, in a city which was alien to him, and with his organisational work oriented towards Italy, Gramsci had much time for writing letters at his disposal: he wrote love letters to consolidate

5 Gramsci 1992a, p. 84.

his fledgling relationship with Giulia, and official letters in order to fulfil the political mandate which had brought him there. Accordingly, in order to study the relation between the public and the private in Gramsci during this period, despite the gaps in the correspondence, and despite the fact that some letters have been lost on account of the clandestine lives led by some and the frontier-hopping existence of others, the correspondence from Moscow and Vienna and the letters sent from Rome between 1924 and 1926 are sufficient. It is precisely in this period that Gramsci begins a series of reflections on love and revolution, on politics and feelings, which constitute a key for the better understanding of the man that he was. The essentials of these reflections are to be found in *Lettere a Iulca*, compiled by Mimma Paulesu Quercioli in 1987⁶ and also included in the collection of correspondence edited by Santucci. It does not appear likely that the discovery of new documents from this period will change the idea of Gramsci that the attentive reader can formulate on the basis of the correspondence currently available.

From 1926 to 1937

A significant portion of Gramsci's correspondence between 1926 and 1937 was published for the first time shortly after the end of the Second World War, in 1947, under the title *Lettere dal carcere*. This edition, whose literary value was recognised with the award of the Viareggio Literary Prize, included some 218 letters, some of them with passages expunged that the then leading group of the Italian Communist Party, headed by Palmiro Togliatti, considered unsuitable for publication, either because they alluded to sensitive family matters, or to political controversies which it deemed inopportune to reopen at that time. Many of the letters which were not published in 1947 were restored in a new edition prepared for Einaudi by Sergio Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini in 1965. This volume, which in subsequent years was translated into many languages, contained 428 letters by Gramsci, 119 of which were published for the first time. Furthermore, in this edition the passages which the previous editors had considered unsuitable for publication were restored. The volume edited by Fubini and Caprioglio was the standard reference during the high point of Gramscian studies in Europe, from the second half of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s; this was also the period in which the Italian Communist Party became the most important organisation in Italy.

6 Gramsci 1987a.

However, in the 1970s, the daily newspaper *L'Unità*, the weekly *Rinascita* and other Italian newspapers and magazines began to publish occasional items from Gramsci's correspondence from the prison years. Following the death of Giulia Schucht, Gramsci's wife, in 1980, their son Giuliano donated the last unpublished letters that the family had preserved in Moscow to the Italian Communist Party, and these were in turn included in various compilations with prologues or commentaries by Valentino Gerratana, Nicola Badaloni, Paolo Spriano, Mimma Paulesu Quercioli, Aldo Natoli, Giuseppe Fiori and Antonio A. Santucci.

A new edition of the prison letters produced by Santucci, which is without doubt the most complete one currently available, appeared in 1996.⁷ Santucci's edition includes a total of 478 letters, 50 more than the edition by Fubini and Caprioglio. Given the particular circumstances in which Gramsci wrote his prison letters and the circuitous routes which some of them had to take in order to reach their intended recipients, it cannot be completely ruled out that some remain unknown to this day; however, even if this were the case, the consensus among Gramsci scholars, as far as this period is concerned, is that all possible avenues of investigation have practically been exhausted and that the work carried out by Santucci can be considered practically definitive.

It is true, nonetheless, that there is still some controversy around the interpretation of some obscure passages from these letters, around the precise date of some of those written in Formia and in the clinic in Rome, around the relation between some of these obscure passages and certain notes in the *Quaderni del carcere* and, of course, around the question of how to evaluate the relationship between Gramsci and Togliatti after 1926 on the basis of what is written in these letters and in other documents.⁸ In the last 10 years, various polemical essays have been written on this subject and on Antonio Gramsci's relationship with Giulia Schucht and with her sisters, Tatiana and Eugenia. Some of these essays have had quite an impact in the media in Italy, where, paradoxically, it is no longer easy to find the critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* edited by Valentino Gerratana.

This last fact is already an indication that the current orientation of the dominant mass media (and not only in Italy), inclined as these are to morbid sensationalism and political opportunism in the society of the spectacle, can hardly be reconciled, if at all, with the philological and historiographical rigour of those who, over the last 40 years, have done the most to make all the

⁷ Gramsci 1996a.

⁸ The publication of the correspondence between Tatiana Schucht and Piero Sraffa has put an end to much of the speculation around this relationship. Cf. Sraffa 1991.

available documentation by and about Gramsci available to the educated public. Leaving speculation and morbid fascination to one side, practically everything that would need to be known in order to assess the persona of Gramsci between 1926 and 1937 is already contained in the editions by Gerratana and Santucci, which have provided the basis for the excellent recent annotated edition in English by Joseph Buttigieg. Almost everything else is a matter of mere detail. It seems to me to be no exaggeration to say that, from the standpoint of philology or historiography – Gramsci had a keen appreciation of both – it is only the immoderate search for originality which can substitute a focus on the isolated detail that is functional to the politicist interests of today for the vision of the whole, that is, a conception which is not in the least hagiographical, and which is grounded in years of study.

In what follows, reference will essentially be made to Gramsci's reflections on the relationship between the public and the private on the basis of his encounter with Giulia Schucht in Moscow. This is a subject which was initially thematised in Italy on the margins of Gramscian scholarship in the mid-1970s by Adele Cambria in a play called *Nonostante Gramsci* (1975) and in a book entitled *Amore como rivoluzione*, which is based on certain items from Gramsci's correspondence, and, although it is of polemical intent, is suggestive in many of its passages.⁹ This book was the first to devote special attention to the other side of the correspondence: the surviving letters written by Giulia and Tatiana Schucht.

It is no coincidence that it was in the context of the feminist literature of the period that special attention was first devoted to Gramsci's reflections on the relationship between public and private, and that this focus was maintained within this literature for a certain time. Indeed, not only has the overcoming or undermining of this dualism been a central theme of the moral and political philosophy of contemporary feminism, but it should also be recognised that the Gramscian studies of the preceding decades had scarcely engaged in any analysis of the figures represented by the women that Gramsci loved and with whom he had an intense relationship (Giulia and Tatiana Schucht, principally). This has to be seen as a notable deficit for anyone intending to develop a sympathetic understanding, with a certain sensitivity, of the fluctuations of Gramsci's own thought in Vienna, in Rome, in the prisons and in the clinics, when his introspection, the expressions of his feelings or of his states of mind and his speculations about the character, personality and feelings of the people he loved are constantly intermingled and interrelated with political discourse, with his plans for intellectual work, and with the form in which the

9 Cambria 1976.

prison notebooks actually take shape, regardless of the various plans Gramsci elaborates.

The best way of reading Gramsci today is to do so against the backdrop of the famous verses that Bertolt Brecht dedicated to the people of the future.¹⁰ This claim makes even more sense in the case of Gramsci's correspondence, since here he reflects openly on the relationship which exists (or which is to be established) between the public and the private. There are three insights contained in those verses by Brecht which Gramsci's correspondence with Giulia and Tatiana Schucht exemplifies perhaps unlike any other contemporary exchange. The first is the awareness, which was acute among the revolutionaries of the epoch of fascism and Nazism, that they were living 'in dark times' (in a vast and terrible world, a formulation reiterated by Gramsci). The second is the recognition of the extent to which the rebel finds himself constrained, against his will, to disorder in questions of love and to an impatient contemplation of nature in times of disorder but also of rebelliousness. The third is the tragic observation that those people who wanted to prepare the way for friendship were not able to be friendly because, in the words of the poet, 'anger, even against injustice, makes the voice hoarse'.

To treat this theme with equanimity is by no means an easy undertaking. What is more, the matter becomes much more complicated when Gramsci's correspondence from 1928 to 1936 is considered in detail. It is complicated by the changes in the prisoner's mental state (changes brought on by his illness and that of Giulia Schucht), by the psychological effects of 'prisonitis', by the interruptions in this correspondence, by the inhibition which Gramsci feels as a result of having to write about feelings of love via an intermediary (on whom he depends in many essential matters, whom he loves, but whom he does not want to hurt), by real misunderstandings, and by the subjective interpretation, *a posteriori*, of these same misunderstandings. Anyone attempting, with a certain sensitivity and with the distance afforded by the passage of time, to unravel this knot made up of the strands of Gramsci's life will undoubtedly feel uncomfortable when coming up against what are merely politicist reductions of such a personal drama. However, the generic assertion that 'the personal, or the private, is also political' (as opposed to an institutions-based conception of politics) is not sufficient in this regard either. Something more is needed, namely respect, comprehension in the broad sense of the word, and – it goes without saying – a certain compassion towards the individuals that were to become entangled in this web.

10 'To those born later': Brecht 1987, p. 318. See Appendix 1 in this volume.

Captatio Benevolentiae . . .^{11†}

In only a few cases – precisely that of Antonio Gramsci, for example, or of Rosa Luxemburg, whose assassination in 1919 was recently commemorated by young people in Germany, after decades of oblivion – would a writer still dare to place two words as beautiful, but as overused, as ‘love’ and ‘revolution’ together in a title. It is even more rare to be able to do so without blushing or feeling uncomfortable. This is especially true in times like these, in which the inexorable drift towards the wholesale commodification of affects goes hand-in-hand with the affirmation of the right to privacy (almost to the exclusion of everything else), and when the calculating conversion of the word ‘revolution’ and its cognates into mere slogans promoting the latest technical innovations invites recalcitrants to avoid such noble terms in their daily lives or, because there is no other remedy, to employ them with caveats, irony or sarcasm.

Perhaps, in this case, what prevents this writer from feeling shame in anticipation of the ridicule elicited by the juxtaposition of these two great words, or suspecting that he is entering the dark forest of anachronisms, is the firmness of a conviction which he assumes is shared: namely, that any reader who has resolved to follow Antonio Gramsci’s biography to the end will have ended up with a lump in his or her throat.¹²

For such is, indeed, the state of mind with which sensitive people (which these days is tantamount to saying ‘revolutionaries’, to the extent that the revolution in affects is always at the same time an act of cultural conservation) usually assimilate Gramsci’s passion for truthfulness; his admirable efforts to carry on thinking – with independence, critically, and with an autonomous point of view – in spite of fascism and his ultimate psychological and moral brutalisation in prison; his tenacious struggle against his own illness through an introspective analysis which was as intense as it was meticulous; or, finally, his intermittent initiatives to re-establish a loving bond with the person he loved. Such feelings on the part of the reader are compounded by the knowledge that Gramsci’s bond with Giulia was impeded and impaired through separation and the lack of communication on her part; through his isolation in prison, through his interlocutors’ own depression; through the pity of his family members which he considered to be false. Time is to be understood here as that psychological time which, in his solitude and in the absence of his loved

11† *Captatio Benevolentiae* (Latin for ‘the gaining of goodwill’) is a rhetorical technique deployed by an orator with the aim of capturing the goodwill of his or her audience.

12 In addition to the biographies referred to above, see Paulesu Quercioli (ed.) 1977.

one, would end up becoming a mere pseudonym for life itself for Gramsci, and a definite cause of unrelenting psychosomatic exhaustion for Giulia Schucht.

As strong, and as shared, as the conviction alluded to above might be, it does not quite seal our argument, however – an argument which, in juxtaposing ‘love’ and ‘revolution’ in Gramsci, locates the amorous and lucid reasons of the heart alongside reasoned political passion as the interrelated and central categories which are to form the basis of the explanation of the tragedy of these lives.

In order to conclude the argument coherently and at the same time to round off the justification developed in the preceding paragraphs, it would be necessary to add an opinion which does not only relate to Gramsci, but which is intended in a more general sense, even though it represents no more than a suggestion, of the kind that are to be believed or taken in good faith: these days, it is only the lumps in our throat – when we are lucky enough to get them – which spare us from the blushes and the shame caused by the postmodern manipulation of the great and beautiful words of our infancy and our adolescence (the infancy and adolescence of humanity, of course). As such, it is probable – I continue to write hypothetically and dubitatively – that it is this remaining capacity to feel emotion, this culturally reformed, visceral permeability which we still retain, such that lumps can form in our throat when we contemplate so much adversity met with such a willingness to resist, which explains Gramsci’s continuing appeal in these times of the crisis of communist culture, when the wolves of advertising are not merely dressing up in sheep’s clothing manufactured from the workers’ tradition, but they are selling it too. This, arguably, is what makes Antonio Gramsci the Marxist thinker most internationally appreciated, most translated, and most read by the younger generations and reread by those other generations for which, in the words of the poet, friendliness was not an option.¹³

However, anyone who does not share an appreciation for the poet’s mode of expression, or for satirically sermonising tones which are redolent of Horace, but who is persuaded, on the contrary, that we are precisely those ‘born later’ that Brecht had mind, and that, as such, the time has arrived to be friendly and to exchange the rhetoric and the metaphors (‘Insist on being right, and merely have a tongue / And right you’ll be’, as Mephistopheles said to Faust)¹⁴ for dispassionate analysis, can arrive at a similar conclusion by a different route: philology. For no other revolutionary thinker has attempted to link so closely the private and the public, the personal and the political – in sum, love and

13 Cf. Appendix 1 in this volume.

14 Goethe 1987, p. 96.

revolutionary activity – as did Gramsci in a letter addressed to Giulia Schucht and dated Vienna, 6 March 1924:

How many times have I asked myself if it is possible to make a connection with the masses when one has not loved anyone, not even one's own family, or if it is possible to love a collectivity when one has not deeply loved individual human creatures. Is this not reflected in my life as a militant? Does it not sterilise my revolutionary qualities and reduce them to mere intellectual facts, to purely mathematical calculations?¹⁵

Love, Which Pardons No One from Loving in Return¹⁶

It is possible that Antonio Gramsci had an intimate relationship with another woman before meeting Giulia Schucht in Moscow. Some of the people who were close to him in Turin have given testimony to this effect, and have even given a name for his lover.¹⁷ However, if this was the case, no trace of this relationship is to be found in his correspondence. It is not surprising that there is no mention of this in his letters from those years, given that, as we have seen, very few of them have been preserved. In the letters Gramsci exchanged with Giulia in Moscow, soon after they met, and those written in Vienna and Rome, when he had already declared his love, there is no reference to a previous love. Neither is there any such mention in any of the letters written from prison. Naturally, given that Gramsci was emotionally reserved, this fact does not disprove the above testimony, although it is strange that the young man did not say anything in this regard during the couple's initial declarations to each other and their reciprocal confessions (when Giulia indeed alluded to a previous relationship of hers), especially given that not much time would have passed since his previous relationship, if indeed he had one. To my knowledge, the only allusion – and a merely generic one at that – to previous sexual relationships occurs in a letter which Gramsci wrote to Giulia soon after meeting her in Moscow. Here, Gramsci states: 'I have even attempted to convince myself that I had put on a performance for you, as I have done on other occasions (and I really have done so before) when, persuaded that I was not capable of

¹⁵ Gramsci 1992a, pp. 271–2.

¹⁶ Dante 1996, p. 91.

¹⁷ Andrea Viglione in Paulesu Quercioli (ed.) 1977, pp. 166–7. Cf. also 'L'universo affettivo di Nino' in Fiori 1991a, p. 109.

being loved (do you remember a discussion we had about a certain stanza of Dante's?), I proposed myself to put on the outward manifestations of love'.¹⁸

As such, we ought to respect the private intimacy of the couple. The same goes for that of their respective families. Gramsci met Giulia Schucht during the summer of 1922. In June of that year he was in Moscow to participate in the second conference of the enlarged Executive Committee of the Communist International. He emerged from this conference as a leader of the Third International. Gramsci had arrived in Moscow severely depressed, and suffering from tremors, tics and occasional convulsions; immediately after the conference, he was admitted to a sanatorium in Serebryany Bor [The Silver Forest] where Eugenia Schucht was also staying as she recovered from mental and physical exhaustion. It was here that Antonio began a relationship with Giulia through the mediation of Eugenia. The Schucht sisters had lived in Italy for a time and spoke Italian.¹⁹ This was undoubtedly decisive for a man like Gramsci, of whom Pier Paolo Pasolini said that he was a shy person whose timidity always led him to live impersonally.

The relationship which Gramsci established with Giulia was, during the initial few months, sporadic, and one of comradeship. The first two messages written by him to Giulia which have been preserved begin with 'Dear comrade'. He addresses her formally and respectfully. In these letters he proposes that they meet in Moscow and in the sanatorium (which was near Moscow) in order to visit Eugenia; here he plays on the (apparent) complicity of Giulia's sister and finishes his letters with the formulations 'affectionately' and 'with affection'. A familiar, humorous vignette which has been preserved, and which is dated 16 October 1922, suggests the existence of a budding intimate relationship: jokes are made at the expense of Giulia's sister Eugenia, who at the same time is the one facilitating the communication between the other two.

The first encounters with Giulia in Serebryany Bor made an enduring impression on Gramsci. A letter which he wrote to her from Rome, a few years later, when their relationship had become a stable one, reveals to us the context and the meaning of their discussion in Serebryany Bor on 'a certain stanza of Dante's' which refers to 'love, which pardons no one loved from loving in return'.²⁰ The setting of their encounter, a room in the sanatorium with only a single bed, gives an idea of how difficult it must have been for both of them to

18 Gramsci 1992a, p. III.

19 Information on the biographies of the Schucht sisters (Eugenia, Giulia and Tatiana) is given in: Cambria 1976; Fiori 1991b, pp. 109–40; Natoli 1990; and the introduction by Mimma Paulesu Quercioli in her edition of Gramsci's letters to Giulia: Gramsci 1987a.

20 Dante 1996, p. 91.

decide upon their relationship there. Antonio would say later: 'I remember all the details because I believe that that night was very important for us, and that subsequently, for a long time, we were playing blind man's buff. How awful!'²¹

The Destabilising Weight of the Brain

The events underway in Italy in the aftermath of the Fascist march on Rome, which had happened in October, delayed Gramsci's return. He was then able to attend the Fourth Congress of the Third International (November–December), in which he had the opportunity to listen to Lenin, who was very pessimistic about the future of the revolution. That speech remained engraved upon his mind and was the origin of his subsequent socio-political reflections in the *Quaderni del carcere* on revolution in the west. Gramsci was most probably the western communist leader who best understood the message of old Lenin. However, at the time (the end of 1922), Gramsci's heart was elsewhere. Between January and February 1923, while he remained in Moscow, where he awaited the outcome of the events in Italy and learned of the attack on his brother Gennaro, who was injured by Fascists in Turin, Gramsci's relationship with Giulia blossomed into love. In his January letters, he still addresses Giulia using the polite form and continues to use the pretext of visiting Eugenia in order to engineer a new encounter with Giulia so that they can strengthen their bond, but in the following letter, which he wrote on the 13th February, Antonio moves on to 'dearest', and makes a declaration of love.

This first declaration of love by Gramsci, at least in writing, is complicated and is the prelude to many other complications that were to come in the future. He tells Giulia several times in this letter that he loves her and that he is sure that she loves him, but he immediately becomes embroiled in a discussion about how 'simple' they both are, and in particular he himself, contrary to all appearances. In love, Antonio begins a struggle to transform himself on an emotional level: 'It is true that for many, many years I have resigned myself to thinking that it was absolutely impossible that anyone could ever love me, almost as a matter of destiny'. Gramsci alludes here to his physical deformity (which, by all accounts, had already given him a complex in Turin, affecting his emotional life) and he undoubtedly recalls the scars of a childhood and an adolescence of suffering, sacrifice and physical weakness; however, in turn he is also surprised, or he says that is surprised, that Giulia notices 'nervous spasms', tics and 'small convulsions' in him. Indeed, immediately afterwards

21 Gramsci 1992a, pp. 390–1.

in the same letter, the strong-willed and persuasive Gramsci reappears. He will hear nothing of talk that it is 'too soon' to consolidate the relationship, as she says, and nothing of entanglements, nor of honeyed psychological intrigues: 'I am not a mystic, nor are you a Byzantine Virgin'.²²

Gramsci was anything but a mystic. Giulia Schucht was then 25 years old, 5 years younger than him. She had been born in Geneva, where her parents were exiles, in 1896. Her father, who was of Finnish descent and anti-Tsarist, had been deported to Siberia; he was forced to leave Russia in 1890, and lived with his family in France, Switzerland and Italy. In Rome, Giulia had graduated as a violinist in 1915, and in the autumn of that year she left for Russia in order to rejoin her family, who were now living in Moscow. She began to work as a teacher in a music school 100 kilometres from the capital. Her family had a certain connection to Lenin and she herself was affiliated to the Bolshevik Party from 1917 onwards. When Gramsci met her, she was working in the local branch of the party in Ivanovo Vosnessensk, a textiles centre which was known as 'the Manchester of Russia'. On account of her education and her work, Giulia was a woman of character and was independent, but at the same time she was very sensitive, and she had a strong bond with her family, with her parents and her sisters.

In a letter which Giulia Schucht wrote when she was 20 years old and which has been preserved, there is a passage which gives an idea of what might have attracted her emotionally to Gramsci in their affinities and differences. It goes as follows: 'There is something strange in my life which prevents me from living as I would like to live. I do not like speaking of this life, which is not as I want it to be. I ask myself which of the two people that there are inside me is the authentic one: the one that I want to be, or the one that I am? But then this very thought prevents me from being myself. There is something which disturbs me, something which is part of me, and this something is my brain. I don't know how to "be"; I know how to see, how to think, sometimes how to feel...'.²³

As chance would have it, then, two adults were to meet in Moscow who shared an ideological affinity – they were both communists and revolutionaries – and who had both felt in their youth the destabilising weight of what they called 'the brain' and the anxiety of not knowing how to be. Gramsci, who was profoundly affected by persistent headaches, or by what he refers to in letters

²² Gramsci 1992a, p. 108.

²³ Cambria 1976, pp. 20–3. On Giulia's personality, see also the interview with Vincenzo Bianco, who directly witnessed the relationship between Giulia and Antonio in Moscow, in Gramsci 1987a, pp. 12–14.

as a 'cerebral anaemia' in Turin, had taken refuge first in study and then, fleeing from solitude, had thrown himself into the maelstrom of political activity. Giulia had felt divided against herself, first in Rome, and then in Moscow; she had a profession, and could be independent, but knew that there was something in her 'brain' which caused her pain, although not only a physical one, and she felt lost when she observed introspectively that what she knew (how to see, feel and think) was a constraint which prevented her from being what she would like to be. Both of them would have liked to be 'simple' people, but there was something inside them telling them that they were not. They both attempted to overcome 'psychological complications' which, from a clinical point of view, were undoubtedly more than the ordinary, trivial complications of the regular normopath. They now sought in love what they had not been able to find in their professional activity, nor in political life. Not everything is coincidence, then, in that first encounter: in time, Serebryany Bor would become something more than a name for them – they later recalled it many times, either directly or by allusion, precisely in the context of depressions, *malaise*, and psychological complications.

In the meantime, the situation in Italy had been deteriorating as a result of the arrest of various of the main communist and socialist leaders of the time. This was the theme of the correspondence between Gramsci and Giulia in the following months: both for what it represented from the political point of view (Gramsci was at the time one of the three communist members of the commission formed in order to facilitate a possible merger with the revolutionary socialists), and because of course the situation in Italy meant, on the other hand, that his return there would be postponed; as a result, Gramsci and Giulia would have opportunities to arrange encounters in Moscow and to deepen their intimate relationship. In one of the letters from Moscow, which is undated, but which was probably written at the end of February 1923 (the same letter in which there is a generic allusion to previous sexual contacts), Gramsci dwells autobiographically on the subject of the 'before' and 'after' of love. He wants to leave the 'wasteland', the 'glacial wilderness' which his life has represented up until that moment, and he declares that he is convinced, in all seriousness, that this is precisely what is happening to him after having met Giulia. That this was no simple matter, however, is demonstrated by the tone with which, after another encounter that had involved him surreptitiously leaving the Hotel Lux where he was residing, he recognises that he has been 'a brute', that he has hurt Giulia 'too brutally', and that he still needs to purge himself of many things.²⁴

24 Gramsci 1992a, pp. 111–13.

The letters written by Giulia Schucht in Moscow to which Gramsci refers in his correspondence have not been preserved (or they remain unpublished); nor have those written by him, if indeed there were any, between March and the end of November 1923, which is when he left for Vienna. In all likelihood, judging from the content and the tone of the letters written when he was in Vienna (these letters are marked by the pain felt at the absence of his loved one and his often repeated desire to be reunited with her), there was no correspondence between Gramsci and Giulia between March and November 1923 precisely because their relationship of love had been consolidated, and there was no need to write that which could be said face to face. Vincenzo Bianco (whom Gramsci asked to help Giulia in Moscow after his departure) has left testimony which confirms this hypothesis, although it contains some lapses of memory.²⁵

Vienna: The Vast and Terrible World

Antonio Gramsci lived in Vienna from the beginning of December 1923 until mid-May 1924, scarcely a winter and half a spring. The memories that he has left us in his letters to Giulia of that 'vast and terrible world which, what is more, is in the hands of the bourgeoisie' are, in general, melancholic, and coloured by a feeling of absence. During those months his political-organisational activity was very intense, but he did not strike up a rapport with the owners of the houses that he lived in there, nor with his closest colleagues, such as the Argentine Mario Codevilla. He was visited in Vienna by Italian comrades on various political assignments; from there he wrote a great number of letters, some of which are extremely interesting for an understanding of the political milieu of the revolutionaries without a revolution: these were addressed to Umberto Terracini, Palmiro Togliatti, Ruggero Grieco, Alfonso Leonetti and other prominent Italian Communists.²⁶

25 See the testimony of V. Bianco in Gramsci 1987a, p. 13. Bianco states that Gramsci told him 'around the month of September' that Giulia 'was in an interesting state'. This does not tally with the date that Giulia's first child was born, in August 1924; nor does it accord with the date of the beautiful letter, written by Gramsci when he was already in Vienna, in which he refers to the recent news that Giulia was pregnant (that is, at the beginning of March 1924).

26 The Vienna correspondence, excluding the letters to Giulia Schucht, comprises over two hundred (200) pages of Santucci's edition: cf. Gramsci 1992a, pp. 132–350. See also Somai 1979.

In Vienna, Gramsci not only had the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the difficulties of organisational and journalistic work carried out far removed from the places where his heart lay and to which his thoughts were directed, but also to recognise the weaknesses and the misery of the sectarianism of some of those close to him. Soon after arriving in Vienna, he writes, referring to the wife of Joseph Frey, the then general secretary of the Austrian Communist Party, in whose house he was living: 'She continually curses the Party, which obliges her to have people as annoying and unpleasant as myself in her house . . . but she retains her Party membership card, because if she didn't, the faction led by her husband in this abominable Party would lose one per cent of its members. This "phenomenon" has also forced me to confront old and familiar themes which I had forgotten somewhat after being away for a year and a half'.

Already in this first letter written from Vienna (dated 16 December 1923), Gramsci begins to complain once again of his solitude and isolation: he feels lonely on an emotional level, and isolated politically. He promptly asks Giulia to come to Vienna to work with him, undoubtedly thinking that this would be the way to deepen a stable relationship between revolutionaries. Indeed, while Giulia remained in Moscow, the main motive for their correspondence was precisely their possible collaboration in ideological and political work. Thus he invites Giulia to undertake the translation of Ryazanov's edition of *The Communist Manifesto* into Italian together with him, he continually makes requests for information on the development of events in Russia, and he attempts to sound out her opinion on the information reaching him about the first serious disagreements within the leadership of the CPSU.

Against this backdrop, one thing is constant: Gramsci's feeling of melancholy at the absence of his loved one, which his political and organisational activity can only partially alleviate.

The sense of routine, the dismal impression Gramsci forms of the disorganisation, the confusion and the pessimism that he observes among the Italian comrades that he meets in Vienna, and the news arriving from Italy and Germany all serve to depress him further. He attempts to get out of the rut, as he had successfully done before in other, similar circumstances, through will-power and by drawing on his sense of humour. In the Vienna correspondence there are recurring examples of this sense of humour, which allowed him to gain a little distance from some of the more serious matters that were in his hands. Thus, in his letter to Giulia of 1 January 1924, Gramsci wonders what the new year will have in store for him and for his love, and then he writes: 'Will we be able to be together for a little time, enjoying each other's presence and

laughing about everyone and everything, with the exception, of course, of the serious things, which are in any case very few in this vast and terrible world?'²⁷

For several weeks, Gramsci's main work in Vienna consisted in composing letters in order to restore relationships in the Italian party and to prepare the fortnightly *L'Ordine Nuovo* for publication. However, these letters, he tells Giulia, 'are becoming a nightmare for me'. He hardly leaves the house: he does nothing but read and write. He has not become acclimatised to the customs of the place: he suffers from the cold and spends time translating. He describes his time in Vienna as 'simple and transparent', recalling a phrase of Rimbaud's. There is nothing more to it. He wants Giulia to go to Vienna, however, to inform him about the debates which are occurring within the CPSU. There is no doubt that Gramsci was concerned by these disagreements. Initially, from the news reaching him, his sympathies seem to lie with Trotsky, for whom he had written something on the evolution of the Italian futurists. He requests a book by Trotsky, and tells Giulia that he cannot find an explanation for Stalin's attack on the latter, that he finds this behaviour very irresponsible and dangerous, but that he has not yet seen the papers and that perhaps his lack of knowledge of the material might have impaired his judgement. This was written on 13 January 1924. In the same letter, Gramsci seeks Giulia's personal complicity: 'In order to avoid any danger related to dispersion, you should write to me in code'. 'Dispersion' is here a euphemism for the atmosphere created by the revolutionary low ebb, which was giving rise to suspicion and to unexpected manoeuvres within the new International. To write in a coded way was not a personal idea of Gramsci's. It was relatively common in that climate, and it has continued to be so in situations where people have to operate in clandestinity or semi-clandestinity. Umberto Terracini had suggested it to Gramsci, and in this letter Gramsci reinforces his political and emotional bond with Giulia by suggesting it to her in turn. At the same time, as he becomes aware of the 'dispersion' enveloping him, his entreaties to Giulia become more urgent and more amorous: 'I cannot be without you. You are a part of me and I feel that I cannot be far from myself. It is as if I were suspended in the air, distanced from reality. I always think, with infinite emotion, about the time that we spent together, in that intimacy, in that inordinate affection for one another.'²⁸

27 Gramsci 1987a, p. 63.

28 Gramsci 1992a, p. 193.

Love and Philology

One of the things that probably most complicated Antonio Gramsci's relationship with Giulia Schucht was the way in which he read her letters. These were, for the main part, short, and they were written in an Italian which was clear and simple, such that the principal obstacle to communication does not seem to have been the fact that the two of them spoke different languages, although it is true that cultural diversity is also an important factor beyond ideological and political identities. However, what mattered even more in this case was the occasionally exasperating meticulousness with which Gramsci scrutinised each paragraph of these intimate letters, in order to detect within them the most minimal variation in the states of mind of the woman that he loved.

This constant sifting, which Gramsci also practised introspectively, would of course end up becoming a veritable obsession. At the end of his life, he confessed in a letter to Giulia that he was in the habit of reading her missives several times: the first time, he says, in the way that one reads the letters of one's loved ones, 'disinterestedly'; then, he adds, he reads them another time 'critically', in order to attempt to guess how Giulia was on the day that she wrote to him, paying close attention to how her writing is, the greater or lesser steadiness of her hand that day, and thus to extract 'all possible indications and meanings' from the letters.²⁹ Gramsci states this at a time when illness and the hardships suffered in the prisons through which he has passed have already taken their toll on his humour and personality. However, already in the Vienna correspondence, the man who has just fallen in love and who wants to change his life betrays some unequivocal signs of his anxiety. Almost in the very next line after his proposal to Giulia that they switch to a cryptic language when speaking of political matters, he writes:

Your last letter made a strange impression on me, and left me a little worried. I can't quite fully understand your state of mind. It seems to me that you are a little worried and disoriented. Is this caused by not having a house yet, being obliged to live the life of a Sinti, and by the exhaustion which goes with working without rest? I hope that this is the case, but I have the impression that it can't be that alone. It seems to me that there is an anxiety in you that is debilitating you more than your fatigue. You must write to me about everything, you have to tell me everything that you feel so that I can at least have the illusion of having you near to me.³⁰

29 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 375.

30 Gramsci 1992a, p. 182.

Even after Gramsci learns at the end of March that Giulia is expecting his child, and knowing that this will bind them even closer together, when he reads a sentence of hers which says that ‘a shadow looms: will I still find you?’, he responds abruptly that he has understood nothing, ‘absolutely nothing’ of this letter. He forms a sequence of inferences, each equally unfavourable, as to the meaning of these words: that she has seen ‘the other man’ again, that she will turn out to have been nothing more than an agent of the *Cheka* in order to gauge his corruptibility, or that her words represent yet another manifestation of the well-known ‘Slavic spirit’. He then repeats, this time in all seriousness, that he still does not understand anything; he solemnly warns that he does want any allusions or insinuations between them, and ends by twice demanding ‘total, absolute clarity, even if it makes you bleed’.

Even further into their relationship, at the point at which it has been definitively consolidated, Gramsci makes an ironic remark in the guise of the philologist, albeit in a very cordial tone, when Giulia announces that she is to travel to Italy with her first son in order to meet Antonio there: ‘you use the words “I want” alongside these other words: “to be near you”. This wish of yours makes a great impression on me’. However, for Gramsci, the philologist, as well as for Gramsci, the exponent of a politics of the will, wanting or willing, is also, or above all else, something to be specified. Thus, after relating his own adventures and recalling melancholically that his son, Delio, and even his own love, has been ‘like a shooting star in the night of the tears of Saint Lawrence’,³¹ Gramsci concludes the letter with the following quip: ‘You will have to explain to me the exact meaning of the words “I want”: Tatiana is sure that you will come in September [this proved correct] and she is already preparing the rooms where we will stay’.³²

It is almost always between two bad moments, however – a few days after having expressed a suspicion or having demonstrated a punctiliousness more suited to philology than to any attempts to foster a loving relationship – that Gramsci writes the most beautiful, intimate letters; indeed it is in these letters that he reflects upon how difficult it is for him to acquire the necessary emotional balance. Thus, for example, when he begins to think, after nearly three weeks without news from Moscow, that Giulia is in a poor state of health, and he receives the news that she is pregnant, he writes: ‘When I read your letter, my heart skipped a beat. You already know why. But your allusion is a vague

31† The Perseids, a meteor shower, reach peak visibility annually between 9–14 August, and hence are referred to by some Catholics as ‘the tears of St. Lawrence’, since 10 August is the date of that saint’s martyrdom.

32 Gramsci 1992a, p. 433.

one, and I am overwhelmed, because I would like to hold you tight and feel for myself, too, the new life which unites ours more than they already are, my most beloved'.

This is the letter in which Gramsci writes the above-mentioned paragraph that makes a connection between revolutionary struggle, which involves the love of a collectivity, and the need to love individual human creatures. In this letter, Gramsci tells Giulia of the solitary life that he has led since early childhood, the enormous complications of his relationships with other people, his need always to hide his most intimate feelings, even in the context of family relations.³³ This declaration is motivated, naturally, by one of the most moving events in life and by the desire which the news has aroused in him to be reunited with the woman he loves. There is another dimension here, however. It is as if Gramsci had an intuition in those circumstances that, among strong characters, and in emotional situations of this kind, it is precisely the mutual recognition of certain shared weaknesses which unites them most. Indeed, in the same letter of 6 March 1924,³⁴ he also lets slip an acute premonition – one that cannot be overlooked.

Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will

Gramsci informs Giulia that he has received a letter from a Russian comrade in Italy who was with Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, and that this comrade, who is not exactly 'of an Italian temperament', has written to him disheartened and disillusioned. In this context he confesses that 'they are asking too much of him', and that this is 'making a sinister impression upon him'. Thus the very man who writes in the party press 'against the pessimism' of others feels alone, he cannot shake off illness, he feels that something is broken inside him, and he needs strength, which can only be given to him spiritually by a woman – a woman of whom he suspects, on the other hand, that she is suffering more than just fatigue.

To avoid trivialising the well-known maxim, *pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will* – so often repeated in relation to Gramsci, and so often taken out of context – it is necessary to take account of the psychological and emotional background which is in fact what gives it life. His article 'Against Pessimism', published in the second issue of the weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo* (15 March 1923) is really an article *against the pessimism of the will*, against the scepticism exist-

33 Gramsci 1992a, pp. 271–3.

34 Gramsci 1987a, pp. 69–73.

ing in the fledgling Communist Party's own ranks as to its political future and role; it is an article against fatalism and determinism, against the sense of inevitability to which Gramsci had himself contributed some years before.³⁵

The difference between what Gramsci states in this article and what he said at the time to Giulia lies in the fact that in the public, political sphere, the reaffirmation of will, or the reaffirmation of the optimism of the will, has to remain demarcated from the emotional balance of the subjects that have to act. However, in accentuating his political critique of the pessimism of the will, it is evident that Gramsci himself not only assumed but reaffirmed a responsibility for which he privately recognised that he did not have sufficient strength. From this it follows, paradoxically, that this strength – the reaffirmation of the will that is necessary in order to combat political pessimism – must come from the weakness of the other, which is what gives balance to the relationship between Gramsci and Giulia.

It is characteristic of strong-willed personalities that they pass themselves off to others as psychologically robust in times of most difficulty. This was also the case of Antonio Gramsci. Indeed, particularly so in Vienna. From the accumulation of difficulties, the Sardinian rebel – who in his university years had not wanted to become a conformist intellectual, that is, a mere academic, and who had thus given his all in the revolutionary events of 1919–20 in Turin – once again found strength in adversity in order to get back on his feet. For this reason, he tells Giulia that his comrades are demanding faith, enthusiasm, resolve and strength from him, and that it is he who is attempting to instil in the comrades in Italy a resolve, an enthusiasm and a strength which he does not have himself. Where is he to find this strength? It is to be found in forging a link between political life and emotional life. It is for this reason that Gramsci, in his last letters from Vienna (and then from Rome), insists so much on uniting love and comradeship.

A Common Engagement in Love and Comradeship

Gramsci makes the most explicit declaration to this effect on exactly the day that his article against pessimism is published: 'I assure you that if it was only a matter of our love, I would not have insisted as I have done. But our love is, and must be, something more: a common engagement, a union of energies for

35 Gramsci himself had written the following to Palmiro Togliatti on 27 January 1924: 'I will not conceal from you the fact that, in these two years that I have been away from Italy, I have become more pessimistic'; see Gramsci 1992a, p. 215.

the struggle, in addition to the pursuit of our own happiness. It is even possible that happiness might consist in precisely this'.³⁶ What is most moving in this proposal for a 'common engagement' is that the man making it has already assumed a dangerous political responsibility, and he knows it: he feels as old as the Chinese Lao Tse, who was born 80 years old; he knows, furthermore, that he is continuing his struggle with his own 'brain', with 'the cockroaches walking over him', with 'the spider sucking his brain', with phantoms, shadows and 'drops of molten metal in his flesh'.

In April 1924 Gramsci was elected an MP for Veneto on the Communist Party list. He sent Giulia the news, and the following month he returned to Italy. Nearly two years had passed since his journey to Moscow, and that journey had changed his life. He returned to Italy knowing that Giulia would give birth to their child in the next few months, but nonetheless he was obliged both to withdraw the proposal that they meet in Vienna in order to work together and to abandon any possibility of travelling again to Moscow by himself.

In spite of this, the feeling of approaching fatherhood and the return to Italy, to an atmosphere that, although politically adverse, was familiar to him, undoubtedly served to calm Gramsci psychologically. In the letters written to Giulia from Italy between May and August 1924, Gramsci continually mentions the persistence of headaches and the sadness that the quandary that they find themselves in causes him: he would like to go to Moscow to meet her, but is unable to do so; he proposes insistently that she travel to Italy, but obtains no response. He feels that 'an immense wall of space and time separates them'. However, even though this is the case, when he brings up their intimate relationship, he is more patient, and even the domestic jokes in these letters (about the debate within the family as to which name should be given to the child, about his own limited role in this, which he recognises, and about the exaltation of love) are no cause for concern; they are tender quips and they reveal a more balanced state of mind than during the months that Gramsci spent in Vienna.

In one of these first letters which Gramsci sent to Giulia from Italy, written while suffering from insomnia and weakness on a torrid Roman summer night, he returns to the theme of the relationship between political activity and emotional life in order to make a generalisation which is relevant to his personality: 'We cannot divide ourselves and dedicate ourselves to a single activity, since life is a unitary whole, and each activity is reinforced by the other in turn'. He then asks himself if love does not reinforce all life by creating a balance and giving a greater intensity to other passions and to other feelings, although, par-

36 Gramsci 1992a, pp. 278–9.

adoxically, he immediately adds that he does not want to become doctrinaire about this.³⁷

In these letters that Gramsci wrote from Rome to Giulia Schucht until March 1925, the date when they met each other again in Moscow and when he became acquainted with his first son, political matters predominate. It was natural that a man who was dedicating a large proportion of his time to the work of antifascist organisation should seek political complicity from his loved one in the letters that he wrote to her. However the proposal for a common engagement retreated into the background for obvious reasons: Giulia was now heavily pregnant and the situation in Italy, especially after the assassination of Matteotti,^{38†} also obliged Gramsci to drop his insistence on shared intellectual work.³⁹

Politics and Paternity

In August 1924 the first son of Giulia and Antonio was born. After jokingly discussing several symbolic names (Ninel and Lev), they called him Delio on Antonio's proposal. The latter had to forego being present at the birth.⁴⁰ His political activity in Italy had become all-consuming. The birth of his son coincided with the moment that Gramsci began to act as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Italy. He did want to help his loved ones materially, however, and sent some money to Moscow through Italian friends of his, although he did not manage to find the appropriate form in which to do this, which was the cause of a misunderstanding with Giulia, who felt offended; Antonio's immediate apology contains a notable reflection:

37 Gramsci 1992a, p. 368.

38† Giacomo Matteotti, a politician representing the United Italian Socialist Party, was abducted and murdered by Fascists on 10 June 1924, days after denouncing Fascist violence and electoral fraud in the Italian Parliament.

39 For a few months after Matteotti's assassination on 10 June 1924, Gramsci thought, like many other antifascists, that the regime established by Mussolini was nearing its end. As he wrote to Giulia: 'the volcano has begun to erupt, releasing an immense tongue of fiery lava which has already swept through the entire country, carrying everything and everyone further away from fascism'. See Gramsci 1992a, p. 356.

40 'I very much regret the fact that I could not go, but my presence here was indispensable, given the situation. The comrade (Schucht) is a communist and will have understood this, I am sure'. See the letter to Vincenzo Bianco of 30 June 1924, in Gramsci 1992a, p. 132.

I think that it is a memory from early childhood in a situation of material poverty and hardship... which creates bonds of solidarity and affinity that no-one could destroy. Do you think that the best of communist societies will be able to change these factors that fundamentally condition individual relations? I think that, at least for some time, the answer is certainly no. Furthermore, it seems to me that such sentiments are those of the exploited classes, and not of the bourgeoisie.⁴¹

During the following months, Gramsci, in addition to expressing to Giulia his happiness at the birth of their son, which he assures her will serve to unite them much more, and expressing his unease at being unable to help as he would have liked, confesses to a certain confusion when it comes to having a concrete idea of what his new fatherhood signifies: 'I think of children in general, their weight, their weakness, the dangers that threaten them at every moment, but I am not able to think of our living son as a concrete individual'. He requests photographs, but he knows that 'objectivity is not the same thing as life, but is rather a cold photographic caricature of life'; he writes, but knows that letters are no substitute for presence. There continued to be some difficulties in his communication with Giulia at this time, but these were mostly external: delays in the correspondence, letters which were supposed to arrive but failed to do so, his lack of confidence in the functioning of the postal system, and his intuition that these external factors could sometimes cause a deterioration in their intimate relationship. On 18 September 1924, Gramsci writes the following to Giulia: 'There is a huge amount of things that I cannot write to you because I do not trust the postal system'. Two weeks later he confesses that it is not only a matter of his distrust in the postal system: 'I feel sad when I cannot send you a letter, and I have to overcome a lot of psychological obstacles when I set out to write to you. It seems to me – and I believe that you have had the same impression – that paper impoverishes all our feelings and becomes an inverse filter – that is to say, something that clouds what is clean and clear'.⁴²

On the emotional level, Gramsci now oscillates between demonstrations of tenderness aroused by Giulia's motherhood; expressions of his preoccupation about her health; suppression of his private ironic comments so as not to hurt her; a certain perplexity about becoming a father, for which he does not seem particularly prepared and having a bad conscience at being absent, far away, at such a decisive moment. 'I am not capable of any estimation of my love for you: it appears to be different from what it was a year ago. Nor can I imagine

41 Gramsci 1992a, pp. 389–90.

42 Gramsci 1992a, p. 389.

the impression that I will have when I see the child in the flesh as opposed to the pale impression that I get from the photograph'.⁴³ He tells Giulia of his activities, his travels around Italy and his impressions of the political and social situation of the moment. He constantly passes from the anecdotal (an overheard conversation, the impressions of a journey, his stay in a certain city) to the categorical, to analysis of the social situation in the Italy of the time and of what might become of it in the near future.

Some passages of these letters are extremely interesting from the point of view of the psycho-social diagnosis of Fascism as it existed, and are all the more to be appreciated given that hardly any other political letters written by Gramsci from his return to Italy until April 1925 have been preserved. The political passages from these exchanges with Giulia stand out for the veracity and the lucidity with which they describe certain of the traits (backwardness, ignorance, intolerance, semi-banditry, corruption and clientelism) which contributed to the consolidation of Mussolini's régime: 'The children, the idiots are becoming the political expression of the situation, and they are wailing and carrying out foolish acts under the weight of the historic responsibility that these ambitious and irresponsible apprentices have suddenly had to shoulder. Tragedy and farce follow one another on to the stage without any connection whatsoever. Disorder is reaching a level unimaginable even in the wildest fantasies'.⁴⁴ Here, Gramsci rectified his wishful thinking in previous months that Fascism would soon come to an end. Absorbed in the antifascist struggle and in the reorganisation of the Communist Party of Italy, even his judgement about the people closest to him remains mediated by political considerations. This is what occurred in February 1925, when, after several failed attempts, Gramsci met Tatiana Schucht, Giulia's sister, with whom he struck up an immediate rapport. In a letter to Giulia he conveyed the opinion that in spite of appearances and rumours, her sister might be closer to the Bolsheviks than to the Russian socialist revolutionaries who were at that time very critical of Leninism.

The Desert of the Purely Political

Gramsci was again in Moscow for a few weeks between March and April 1925. During these weeks, when he participated in the work of the Fifth Session of the Enlarged Executive of the Communist International, he was reunited with Giulia for a few days, and he became acquainted with his son, Delio. Not many

43 Gramsci 1992a, p. 401.

44 Ibid.

written memories of that visit have been preserved. Gramsci would later recall, after a walk with Giulia and Delio in a Moscow park, that he did not have a favourable impression of the manner in which the Schucht family had begun to bring up his son, and he would later refer, in a polemical context, to the influence wielded by Eugenia, Giulia's older sister, whose affection for the boy was a touch obsessive and drove her to usurp his real mother. However, it is evident that after this journey, some notable changes occurred in the correspondence between Antonio and Giulia. Gramsci had stabilised his relations with the Schucht family, extracted a promise from Giulia that she would go to Italy with their child as soon as she could (which she did in fact do a few months later), and their emotional bonds had been strengthened. Probably for this reason, between spring and autumn, 1925, Gramsci's letters become shorter and less frequent, and there is less anxiety in them. The knowledge that Giulia will soon arrive allows him better to withstand the periods in which he feels dejected, even when the heat of the Roman summer sets his nerves on edge.

In the meantime, Antonio has been obliged to redouble his political and organisational activity, not only as an MP, but also as general secretary of the Party: 'Everything which is not immediate political activity has been erased from my mind'.⁴⁵ When the summer heat arrives, he starts to feel worse; he has not lost the sense of humour that he had displayed during the months immediately before the birth of his son, but the references to his own state of mind become more and more gloomy. He says that he feels like 'the remains of a shipwreck at the mercy of the waves', and describes his parliamentary debut pessimistically and in a somewhat distanced way; he complains several times of the disorder and disconnection existing in his own ranks, and he once again starts to feel psychologically tired and old, as he did in Vienna.

Gramsci alludes at least twice during these months to the 'desert' represented by a life dedicated exclusively to politics. Symptomatically, he now sees a way out of this desert in his conversations with Tatiana, whom he had judged almost exclusively in political and ideological terms only a few weeks earlier, and feels that these conversations give him an intimation of the psychological and physical balance that Giulia and Delio's long awaited arrival in Italy will restore to him. His requests to Giulia now emphasise his need to escape the unilateral mechanisation of his own life entailed by his exclusive dedication to politics. He now sees love as something which can prevent him from 'becoming a conformist intellectual, becoming mechanical, apathetic and ending up a puppet who always repeats the same words and the same gestures'.⁴⁶

45 Gramsci 1992a, p. 424.

46 Ibid.

This state of mind, however, does not imply the loss of Gramsci's political lucidity. The diagnosis that he makes of the situation in Italy in June 1925, when he begins to feel compelled to 'cover his tracks' and to escape the attention of the political police in order to carry out his activities, reads like a premonition: 'We are strong enough that any initiative we might take will lead to our forces being discovered, and yet we are not strong enough to withstand a frontal attack'.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Gramsci notes that he is losing his appreciation of nature in these circumstances. He then attributes this, as does Brecht, precisely to the constraints of an exclusive dedication to politics.

There is nothing more revealing of how an exclusive dedication to politics can come to represent a 'desert' for a sensitive man than to compare what Gramsci says about nature in the last letter which he sent to Moscow before Giulia and Delio's journey to Italy with the letter one year later in which he recounts his stay in Trafoi with Delio to Giulia, and with the description of the landscape that he himself would make in January 1927 after his arrest, when he was in exile on Ustica.

Indeed, during the mid-August holiday in 1925, in the same letter in which he tells Giulia that she will have to explain to him the exact meaning of the words 'I want', Gramsci describes one of the journeys that his organisational work has forced him to undertake, and he describes his impressions as follows:

I have seen landscapes that are, by all accounts, extremely beautiful, panoramas seemingly so admirable that foreigners come a long way to contemplate them. For example, I was in Miramare, but it appeared to me like one of Carducci's errant fantasies; the white towers seemed to me like whitewashed chimneys; the sea had a dirty yellowish colour because the labourers who were building a road had thrown tons of detritus into it; the sun gave me the impression of a radiator out of season.⁴⁸

Gramsci then proceeds to comment that he is becoming apathetic, and that these impressions must be due to the fact that the feeling of the absence of those he loves is causing him to lose his appreciation for nature.

His perception of nature was altered by his loved ones' arrival in Italy during the autumn of that year. Giulia and Delio stayed with Antonio in Rome until the summer of 1926, although in various houses for security reasons. At the end of August, Gramsci took a break from his political activity and took a brief

47 Gramsci 1992a, p. 422.

48 Gramsci 1992a, p. 432.

holiday with his son in Trafoi (Bolzano) while Giulia returned to Moscow. In September, he wrote to Giulia:

I think that Delio's time in Trafoi, in such magnificent surroundings of mountains and glaciers, will have made a deep impression on him. We played together. I made a few toys for him, and we made some fires in the countryside. There weren't any lizards, so I couldn't teach him how to catch them. It seems to me that a very important phase is now beginning for him – that phase which leaves the clearest memories, because as it unfolds, the vast and terrible world is conquered.⁴⁹

Even some months after his arrest, when he was on Ustica, and despite being exiled, despite his lack of freedom, despite the ominous signs and the uncertainty of the new situation, despite the fact that he was awaiting trial for his political activities, far away from Giulia, Gramsci was able to draw upon something that would have been impossible a few months previously. He was an exile, but he had time on his hands, and could now see nature in a different way:

We have at our disposal a very beautiful terrace from which by day we admire the boundless sea and at night the magnificent sky. The sky, free from all urban haze, allows us to enjoy these marvels with the greatest intensity. The colours of the sea's water and of the firmament are really extraordinary in their variety and depth: I've seen truly unique rainbows.⁵⁰

The explanation for this change in Gramsci's way of perceiving nature is psychological, and he himself outlines it in a letter written a week earlier to his sister-in-law, Tatiana. Despite having lost his freedom of movement, the atmosphere on Ustica is allowing him to regenerate himself both physically and mentally, because he needs a period of absolute rest after months and months of overwhelming political activity.⁵¹

49 Gramsci 1992a, p. 446.

50 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 67.

51 Letter of 7 January 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 62–3.

The Subterranean World

The letters sent from Ustica reveal a calmness of spirit and even, on occasion, a certain euphoria. The euphoria would dissipate after his transfer from the island to San Vittore prison in Milan, in early February 1927, but his serenity in the face of such adversity was to be the main feature of his prison letters. Even the simile which Gramsci uses to relay his state of mind to Giulia, imagining himself to be like one of the sailors who accompanied Fridtjof Nansen to the North Pole, is suggestive of a certain serenity tinged with irony: he advances slowly, very slowly, after becoming trapped in the ice, taking advantage of its forward thrust as it progressively separates.⁵² Indeed, for more than a year, until after Gramsci and other communist leaders were put on trial in Rome, and after he was transferred, having been convicted, to the penitentiary institution in Turi de Bari, the great majority of the letters which he wrote to Tatiana, to Giulia, to his mother and to other family members do not give any hint of impending tragedy. What emerges in these letters, apart from his equanimity, is Gramsci's moral fortitude, his emotional self-control, his restraint in political judgement, his practical sense and realism, his criticism of conventionalism, and above all his sense of humour, in an ironic vein not always understood by his interlocutors.

Between exile in Ustica and his prison cell in San Vittore, Milan, Gramsci begins to construct for himself an ethics of resistance based on the lucid and distanced observation of the new world that he is discovering and on the emphasis of what he believes are the main features of his own personality. He does not wish to be dominated by his affliction, nor does he want to be consoled. He has known isolation before, and has known how to be alone in the midst of the multitude on other occasions, and he does not believe that the new situation will get the better of him.⁵³

During the time that he was in good physical health, Gramsci was more concerned to assuage the fears of those close to him in the face of an uncertain but sombre future, than to request help or to plead for clemency. Accordingly, he reminds his mother of his physical and moral fortitude, joking with her about priests and prayers, but above all warning her that there is something worse than prison, as bad as this might be, and that this something is dishonour as a result of moral weakness or cowardice.⁵⁴ He points out to his brother Carlo

52 Letter of 18 April 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 100–1.

53 See the letters to Tatiana Schucht, 25 April 1927 and 12 September 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 106 and p. 137 respectively.

54 See the letters to his mother, 12 March and 15 May 1928 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 186 and pp. 206–7.

in cutting fashion the little that the latter has known of his life thus far and of the moral principle of resistance – the profound convictions which are not to be traded for anything in this world.⁵⁵ He adopts an ironic tone with Tatiana Schucht about the defects in her Italian and also in relation to the material that he is reading himself, and gives her advice when she falls ill. For months he maintains a sporadic but relatively balanced correspondence with Giulia. However, he chooses Tatiana as his main correspondent in order to maintain contact with the Communist Party through her and Piero Sraffa⁵⁶ and, in passing, partially to relieve the burden which is most crushing him – namely the conventionalism in his correspondence which is required in order to conform to prison regulations, with all the room for misinterpretation that this affords when it comes to the communication of feelings of love.

Already in these letters, however, Gramsci's moral rigour and high sense of honour and personal dignity are at odds with an emotional intelligence which he acknowledges is inadequate. He has a high sense of his own moral strength, and he demands a lot from himself, but he wants others (Giulia, Tatiana, his mother, his brother Carlo) to consider him 'a normal man' when patently he is not.

Gramsci declares a hatred of everything that is conventional. He does not want to see himself reduced to a conventional correspondence. This is already the case in Vienna, when he begins writing to Giulia, but the sensation was only to become more acute for him when faced by the prospect of a conventional prison correspondence.⁵⁷ In prison, he dedicates much time to introspection, almost as much as to reading, and soon he feels that he is losing his 'outward sensitiveness', his 'Southern qualities'. Gramsci attempts to use willpower to control his feelings and emotions. He sees this as a form of self-defence but doubts whether the results of these efforts are always positive or consistent with his conviction that it is necessary to be practical and realistic even in kindness. It appears that all the certainty of his arguments on the moral principle of resistance is transformed into doubt, and even uncertainty, when he is confronted with his own feelings. Thus he oscillates between the espousal of an external coldness and indifference, the sporadic recognition that he himself has ended up acquiring a 'certain morbid sensibility', and the acknowledgement that he must accept the confusion caused in him by having

55 Letter to Carlo Gramsci, 12 September 1927 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 138–40.

56 Details of this choice are given in Spriano 1988; Natoli 1990; in Gerratana's introduction to Sraffa 1991; and in Lepre 1998.

57 Letter to Tatiana Schucht of 25 April 1927 and letter to Giulia Schucht of 2 May 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 106 and 109 respectively.

to speak or write of intimate things. He is aware that his correspondence is to a certain extent 'public', since other people are reading it (prison staff and political friends), and he is unable to overcome the self-consciousness that he feels when speaking of his intimate feelings in front of third parties.⁵⁸

From the outset, already while on Ustica, Gramsci was of the opinion that his capacity to resist as a prisoner would have to be directly linked to a programme of reading and study. Indeed, he makes plans to this effect. However, he also knows from the outset that the more detailed these plans are, the less likely it is that he will be able to carry them out. He applies his concept of utopia to himself. This is not only for reasons which are external, of a general kind, or related to the obstacles presented by exile and imprisonment, but is also born of a self-awareness, a knowledge of his own character, and because he considers himself to be a man of polemics and dialogue who needs to measure himself intellectually against other interlocutors.

It is precisely for this reason that the best thing about the letters that Gramsci writes from San Vittore prison is his ironic and vivid description of his conversations with others, the metaphorical use of some of his prison readings in order to relay the evolution of his own states of mind, and the form in which he recounts the discovery of a world whose existence he could scarcely have imagined a few months previously to the people that he loves: the subterranean world of exiles and prisoners, of 'non-Christians', a world which makes him think how difficult it is to grasp the true nature of men on the basis of their external features. It is worth recalling his description of the phalanx of prisoners that drags itself like an immense worm from Palermo to Milan, depositing segments of itself in each prison, only to regain them in other lairs.⁵⁹ Equally memorable is an account by Gramsci in which he takes a standpoint somewhere between the distance typical of the anthropologist and the critical questioning characteristic of the politician. His account regards that subterranean world which lives and reproduces itself on the margins of the other world and which ultimately constitutes its Dostoyevskian human substratum: Bedouins from Cyrenaica, Sicilian *Mafiosi*, Neapolitan *Camorristi*, pale imitations of Farinata and seemingly harmless thieves: 'a whole subterranean world ... extremely complicated, with its own life of emotions, of points of view, of points of honour, and formidable, iron hierarchies'.⁶⁰

58 Letters to Tatiana Schucht, 12 September and 19 December 1927 and 10 July 1928 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 136, 161 and 212 [translation modified – N.G.].

59 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 12 February 1927 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 70.

60† Letter to Tatiana Schucht, April 11, 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 96. Buey adds 'and a particular sense of solidarity' to the quotation, although this is not in the original.

This first period in prison in San Vittore, which opens with the simile of Nansen's sailors, conjuring an image of a consciously chosen serenity in the face of difficulty, draws to a close between February and April 1928 with another simile and with the surfacing of a suspicion.

In his letters to Giulia, Gramsci informs her that there has been a whole cycle of changes affecting his state of mind, and then states that a period of his life in prison is coming to an end. This was a prelude to the trial that would ultimately take place in Rome. Gramsci now suggests that he himself is changing tactics in terms of the ethics of resistance. He has become more stoical. He has decided to stop opposing that which is necessary and ineluctable 'with the earlier means and ways,' and he now intends to gain control of the process underway by accentuating his sense of irony. In this context, he returns to his metaphor:

My cell gets a light that is midway between that of a cellar and that of an aquarium. However you mustn't think that my life goes by with such monotony and sameness as it might seem at first sight. When one has become accustomed to aquarium life and has adapted one's sensory system to grasping the muffled and crepuscular impressions that flow through it (always assuming a somewhat ironic standpoint), an entire world begins to teem around you, with a particular vivacity of its own, with its particular laws, with its essential course. What happens is the same as when one casts a glance at an old tree trunk half ruined by time and inclement weather and then little by little one focuses one's attention ever more fixedly. At first one sees only some damp, mushrooming fungus, with a big snail here and there, which drips slime and slithers by slowly. Then, a little at a time, one sees an ensemble of colonies of tiny insects that move about and work, repeating the same efforts and going over the same path again and again. If one preserves one's aloof stance, if one does not turn into a big slug or a small ant, everything in the end becomes interesting and helps to pass the time.⁶¹

The irony is starting to become dark. The subterranean world continues to be an interesting curiosity for Gramsci when he observes it from an appropriate distance; however it is no longer a world of men, as primitive and base as these might be (*Mafigiosi*, *Camorristi* or delinquents), but one populated by slugs and insects, which suggests a certain psychological anxiety. Gramsci is still in relatively good health, but for precisely this reason he reveals his dislike of the

61 Letter to Giulia Schucht, February 27, 1928 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 180–2.

way in which his comrades have focused the solidarity campaign around the trial and alludes to a preoccupation which will become obsessive in the years to come: 'I have ... recently received a strange letter signed Ruggero, which requested an answer. Perhaps prison life has made me more distrustful than normal prudence would require; but the fact is that, despite its stamp and its postmark, this letter made me lose my temper'.⁶²

This letter from Ruggero Grieco, dated 10 February 1928, and received by its addressee in March, has become one of the themes most frequently addressed by Gramsci's biographers and interpreters.⁶³ There is good reason for this: not so much on account of what the letter itself states, nor what Gramsci says to Giulia a month after receiving it (since, when all things are considered, the fact that it exasperates him is probably still within the bounds of what might be called prudence), but on account of the terrible terms in which he would describe it several years later. Gramsci discussed the letter in conversation with Tatiana in the Milan prison shortly after he received it, a few months before his trial. On that occasion he expressed his annoyance, but he also added – significantly – that the examining magistrate had warned him that the letter in question could cost him a few more years in prison, suggesting that his political friends were betraying him. Thus was born a suspicion that would torment him for years to come and which was to add a new twist to his way of understanding the relation between the public and private spheres.

Prisoner 7047

The trial of the leaders of the Communist Party took place in Rome between the end of May and the beginning of June 1928. Gramsci was condemned to 20 years, 4 months and 5 days in prison. He had calculated that he would be sentenced to a maximum of 14 to 17 years. Even though he had the opportunity to speak with other comrades about the letter from Ruggero Grieco while he

62 Letter to Giulia Schucht, April 30, 1928, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 201.

63 The letter is reproduced in Spriano 1988, pp. 135–7. It opens with a paragraph expressing affection and solidarity, in which Grieco enquires about Gramsci's state of health; in the following paragraphs, even though he knows that it might constitute a violation of the prison regulations, Grieco gives news of the internal struggles within the Russian Communist Party, their repercussions in the European Communist parties, and comments upon the international situation; he then announces to Gramsci that he intends, together with Togliatti, to publish a selection of the former's articles; finally, he concludes by asking him to write to him at the Lux Hotel in Moscow. The tone is amicable and occasionally humorous.

was in prison in Rome during the trial, it is possible that the difference between his own calculation and the actual sentence he was given served to heighten the suspicions which had been sown in his mind by the examining magistrate. Alternatively, it is possible that Gramsci considered that the letter might have derailed the ongoing diplomatic negotiations that could have improved his situation. However, these speculative hypotheses thus far uncorroborated.⁶⁴ It is well known, however, that a new phase in Gramsci's life began with his conviction and transfer to the penal institution in Turi. He was imprisoned in Turi from July 1928 until November 1933. There he was registered as prisoner number 7047.

In prison in Turi, Gramsci set about organising himself according to the same criteria for resistance which had sustained him since his arrest in 1926. Referring to Gramsci, the Fascist public prosecutor had emphasised the fact that the régime intended to prevent this mind from thinking. Gramsci did all he could to prevent this strategy from being put into effect: he elaborated a new plan of studies; he organised himself in order to make time for reading; he requested and obtained books which he considered indispensable; he continued the work of teaching himself various languages; he began to translate texts from German, English and Russian; he obtained permission to write in his cell; he initiated an interesting intellectual dialogue with Piero Sraffa; and he drafted the main part of what we know as the *Quaderni del carcere*.

However, there are at least three factors which determined a notable change in Gramsci's manner of understanding the relation between the reasons of reason and the reasons of the heart, between the public and the private, between political and moral engagement and the realm of affects. The first of these factors was the constant deterioration in his health. The second factor was the disintegration of his affective, intimate relationship with Giulia Schucht. The third factor was his political distancing from his closest comrades. Together, these three factors would combine to produce a considerable emotional instability in Gramsci, which manifested itself in his very accentuated mood swings; his tendency to isolation; his irritability in his exchanges with those closest to him; his intermittent difficulties in concentration on an intellectual level; his suspicions which would occasionally become obsessive; his oscillation between a still distanced and cheerful irony and a bitter sarcasm; the accentuation of the punctiliousness of the philologist in his intimate corre-

64 The documentation available (originating from the archives of the USSR) on the secret negotiations with the Vatican for a prisoner exchange between September 1927 and January 1928 can be found in Ricchini, Melograni and Santucci 1988, pp. 15–21.

spondence; and his increasing sentiment of personal defeat, to the point of feeling close to death.

What is most notable is that there are scarcely any traces of any of this, or the suffering that it must have caused, in the notebooks that he was simultaneously writing in prison. It appears that Gramsci managed to block out his pain, his suffering, his mood swings, his irritations, his suspicions and his obsessions almost completely in the hours upon hours that he dedicated to writing the notebooks. Here he was able to take an intellectual distance and draw on a moral strength whose ultimate expression is to be found in a passage from a letter to his mother: 'I never speak of this negative aspect of my life, first of all because I do not want to be pitied; I was a soldier who had no luck in the immediate struggle, and combatants cannot and must not be pitied, when they have fought not because they were forced to do so but because that's what they consciously set out to do'.⁶⁵ In these words lies the key to understanding Gramsci's character as a man of resistance; it is also to be found in what he reveals in some of the letters he writes to Tatiana from Turi during the worst moments of his illness, when he asks for help (but *only and exclusively* the help that he desires at that particular moment and in the precise form that his volition dictates).

Gramsci's health had already deteriorated during his transfers from one prison to another – from Milan to Rome for the trial, and then from Rome to Bari once the trial had finished. In June 1928, he writes that he has been diagnosed with chronic uraemia. As a consequence of this he also suffers from expulsive periodontitis. At the same time, he also experiences periods of nervous exhaustion. In July, he had an outbreak of herpes that causes a very painful inflammation, and by his own account he spent a few days in which he 'writhed like a worm' from the infernal pain.⁶⁶

In December of the same year, when he was already in Turi, he suffered an attack of uric acid which left him considerably incapacitated for three months. In November 1930, his prolonged insomnia became unbearable: he slept an average of two hours a night, and had problems concentrating.⁶⁷ From mid-August 1932, he had serious intestinal problems that were not merely attributable to his poor diet; he felt that he was beginning to lose his strength; he again suffered from insomnia; and he thought that his capacity for resistance was being broken, and that he was losing control of his impulses and the basic

65 Letter to his mother, 24 August 1931, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 58.

66 Letters to Tatiana Schucht, July 10 and July 20, 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 211 and 213 respectively.

67 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 4 November 1930, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 357–8.

instincts of his temperament.⁶⁸ In September he entered a manic phase. At this point, he described his situation as one of ‘neurasthenic frenzy, ... spasmodic obsession that did not give me a moment’s peace’.⁶⁹ In December 1932 he again had insomnia and asked for Tatiana to seek medical advice so that he could take sleeping pills. In March 1933 he experienced a serious crisis, lost consciousness and fell to the ground, and could not take care of himself, such that he had to be assisted in his cell by other comrades.⁷⁰

It was only at this point, after five years in prison, when Doctor Umberto Arcangeli visited him in Turi de Bari, that Gramsci was given a relatively precise diagnosis of his various ailments. Until then, he had been examined by prison doctors who prescribed him palliatives or placebos, and, in some cases, treated him as a political enemy. Doctor Arcangeli diagnosed him with tubercular lesions in the superior lobe of his right lung, with haemoptysis, arteriosclerosis with arterial hypertension and permanent insomnia, but most importantly, he also indicated that he might have Pott’s disease – tuberculosis of the spinal column affecting the vertebrae, which usually causes sudden pain through irritation of the roots of the spinal nerves, and leads to kyphosis if contracted during childhood. It is possible that Gramsci had suffered the condition described by the British surgeon, Percival Pott, since childhood. This would explain the deformity of Gramsci’s spine and also – since the condition had not been treated – the recurrent episodes of irritability that he had experienced since his adolescence.⁷¹ In such conditions, in the face of an illness discovered very belatedly, whose treatment required immobilisation and rest from the outset, it was reasonable for Doctor Arcangeli to reach the conclusion that Gramsci would not be able to survive for long in prison conditions. Despite this, however, this situation continued for another seven months until November 1933, when Gramsci was transferred to a clinic in Formia. Gramsci’s condition would only improve sporadically in the following years.

68 Letters to Tatiana Schucht, August 15 and 29 August, 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 198 and p. 202 respectively.

69 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 17 October 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 218.

70 At this time the prison doctor described his condition with the same words that the doctor who visited him in Turin had used many years previously: ‘cerebral anaemia or debilitation’.

71 Gramsci refers to this in a letter to Tatiana Schucht, 23 April 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 290.

Rational Choice and Sensitivity

The relationship between Gramsci and Giulia Schucht, which had already been difficult in the preceding years, underwent further complications in the years that he spent in Turi de Bari, reaching crisis point between 1932 and 1933. It is difficult to say what contributed more to this crisis: the lack of news from Giulia for months on end; the silences and misunderstandings in relation to her true state of health; the pressure put on her by her family to discourage her from travelling to Italy, at a time when the prisoner obviously needed it; the communication at cross purposes in a correspondence which could never be authentic; Gramsci's own emotional instability; his conception of the relationship between affective and political life; or the obsessions which ended up consuming prisoner 7407.

Shortly after arriving at the prison in Turi de Bari in 1928, Gramsci took a decision that was certainly of critical importance to the complication of his relationship with Giulia. The prison regulations limited the number of letters that he could write, and he elected to nominate Tatiana as his principal correspondent rather than Giulia. This was a rational choice, given that Tatiana was in Italy and could visit him, thus facilitating communication with the exiled leadership of the Party (in Paris and Moscow) via Piero Sraffa (who was able to travel, both legally and frequently, to Italy from England).⁷² Tatiana was to have returned to Moscow around that time in order to be reunited with her family, but she made a decision in line with Gramsci's, and sacrificed herself for him against the wishes of her parents.

This rational choice by Gramsci, which in normal conditions would have merely constituted a positive means of dealing with the situation, was transformed into something else, and it had an unexpected effect. This was not only on account of the abnormality of the situation of being a prisoner in a Fascist prison, but was also due to the illnesses from which Gramsci and Giulia both suffered, and the fact that the couple which depended on Tatiana's help was beset by psychological complications. Tatiana thus became the Antigone of this modern tragedy,⁷³ but she also interfered in the relationship between Antonio and Giulia insofar as she chose not to relay to her sister the letters from him that she thought would upset or depress her, and did not communicate to him the seriousness of her sister's mental illness, for similar reasons. Despite her good intentions, Tatiana unwittingly contributed to the dissolution

72 Cf. Gerratana's 'Gramsci e Sraffa', introduction to Sraffa 1991, pp. xxxi ff.

73 This accounts for the title of Natoli 1990, *Antigone e il prigionero*; the book's subtitle is 'Tania Schucht lotta per la vita di Gramsci' ['Tania Schucht fights for Gramsci's life'].

of one of the common threads which had brought the couple together emotionally since they had met: their consciousness of the suffering produced by the destabilising weight of the mind, their mutual awareness of the weakness that accompanies moral strength; an awareness which fosters mutual aid in exceptional situations, as was the case here. It is symptomatic in this sense that the relationship between Antonio and Giulia would always improve and become more balanced following those occasions when they recognised the seriousness of their mutual afflictions, when they recognised their own weaknesses through those of the other.⁷⁴

Despite Gramsci's complaints about Giulia's silences, his emotional restraint (now imposed upon him by his incarceration), his discrepancies with Giulia in relation to the education of their sons (he considered that she and her family were too 'romantic'), and his repeated observation that an emotional distance was being created between them (which was understandable enough, given the circumstances), the letters that he wrote until the first half of 1930 do not give the slightest hint of what was to follow. However, in May of that same year, Gramsci began to feel that the reason that Giulia was not writing to him was that she was hiding something from him. A week later, in a letter to Tatiana, he states that the isolation in which he finds himself is a consequence not only of the malevolent policies of his adversaries, as was to be expected, but also of his abandonment by those close to him, which was something that he could not have foreseen. He goes on to say that he feels subjected to several different prison régimes and alludes, for the first time in his correspondence, to 'the other prison', to the fact that he has been cast out of family life: 'blows ... come at me ... from where I would least suspect them'. It immediately occurs to him that he is writing to the very person who has done the most to help him since his imprisonment, but, nevertheless, he wants it to be clear that, good intentions apart, the substitution of one person for another can be of no help in this matter.

Reaching this point in the communication of his impressions, Gramsci writes something between a confession and a declaration of principles, which affords an insight into his concept of the relation between reason and sensibility:

If the truth be told, I am not very sentimental and it isn't sentimental matters that torment me. It's not that I am insensitive (I don't want to pose as a cynic or a blasé person); but in fact emotional matters concern

74 A. Lepre deals with this theme with sensitivity in the chapter entitled 'Un inestricabile groviglio di pubblico e privato' ['An inextricable knot of public and private'] in Lepre 1998, pp. 131–7.

me too, I live them, combined with other elements (ideological, philosophical, political, etc.) so that I couldn't say where emotion ends and where instead one of the other elements begins, perhaps I couldn't even say precisely which of these elements is involved, so much have they become united in an inseparable whole and in a single life. Perhaps this is a strength; perhaps it is also a weakness, because it leads one to analyze other people in the same manner and therefore perhaps to draw erroneous conclusions.⁷⁵

On a generic level, Gramsci thus reaffirms the substantial unity of the person who feels, the person who thinks and the person who fights for an ideal – a unity which constitutes the dignity of the person, his or her coherence. He considered that the substance of being a revolutionary consists precisely in this. However, in terms of the concrete case in question, which is his own life in prison, where he is dependent on the feelings and actions of others, this passage leaves a doubt hanging in the air – namely whether this coherence, which has so often shown itself to be a strength in social relations which are mediated by the political, might not be at the same time a weakness as far as interpersonal relations are concerned. This, it seems to me, is how the end of the letter is to be interpreted.

It is no coincidence that it was precisely Gramsci's friend, Piero Sraffa, who best understood the risk of Gramsci's unitary conception in relation to matters which required practical solutions: Sraffa had the astuteness of the scientist with his keen appreciation for the analysis and distinction of elements (although in truth he also had the advantage of the distance and dispassion afforded by being outside prison).⁷⁶ Sraffa understood that it is one thing to theorise the unitary conception of the dignity of the person, and another to blur distinctions when attempting to find out the true causes of one's own isolation. Sraffa did what was reasonable in the circumstances. He travelled to Moscow, visited Giulia in the hospital where she had been admitted, obtained a diagnosis of her illness (amnesia, depression, repeated losses of consciousness) and returned with an answer to Gramsci's doubts: Giulia had not written because she feared that Antonio would discover her true state of health if he read her letters, and was worried that this would not be beneficial to him.⁷⁷

75 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 19 May 1930, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 331–2.

76 Cf. Gramsci and Sraffa 1986, particularly pp. 57–76; cf. also Sraffa 1991.

77 Schucht 1991, p. 587; A. Lepre discounts any political motive in Giulia's silence, referring instead not only to Giulia's illness, but also to the pressure from her family – cf. Lepre 1998, pp. 141 ff.

In the months following this clarification, the mutual recognition of hardships once again served to strengthen this difficult relationship. Occasionally, in his correspondence both with Tatiana and with Giulia during those months, the 'unsparing truthfulness' to which Gramsci is given surfaces, even when his interlocutor is a loved one who is doing everything to please him. The following, in a letter to Giulia, is an example: 'I would like to know under what circumstances and in relation to what subjects you were particularly struck by this similarity [in our thinking]. Our correspondence lacks precisely an effective and concrete "correspondence"; we have never been able to initiate a "dialogue": our letters are a series of monologues that do not always manage to find a point of accord even along general lines; if to this we add the time element, which causes us to forget what was written previously, the impression of pure "monologue" is reinforced. Don't you agree?'.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, the letters of Giulia Schucht which have been published thus far are not yet sufficient for a detailed understanding of this other tragedy (or the other side of the same tragedy). However, with those letters that have been preserved, and the references that her sister Tatiana makes to others of them, there is more than enough material in order to imagine it with 'concrete fantasy', as Gramsci wished, without having to indulge in speculation or mere fantasy.⁷⁹ It is sufficient to reflect a little on two words which are repeated in her letters, which are almost always extremely brief: 'weariness' and 'melancholy'. It is not difficult to imagine, for anyone who is not obsessed by politicism or by grey, lifeless theory, what 'weariness' and 'melancholy' might have meant for a young, cultured violinist who was living through the aftermath in Russia of the ten days that shook the world, with two sons from a man with whom she had only lived together for a few months, and who, furthermore, had been sentenced to 20 years in prison in Italy, several thousand kilometres away.⁸⁰

In general, the letters which Gramsci sent to Giulia in 1931 and during the first months of 1932 are affectionate, with occasional reminiscences and tender concern for her health and for the education of their sons, and they were written always with the intention of helping her to overcome the psychologically difficult time that she was passing through. In January 1931, Gramsci believes that if he is kept well informed about Giulia's state of health, relations between them will be frank and spontaneous. In February, he recognises that he has

78 Letter to Giulia Schucht, 6 October 1930, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 355.

79 Schucht 1991; Gramsci and Schucht 1997.

80 A. Cambria has placed the emphasis on this other side of the tragedy: cf. Cambria 1976, pp. 99 ff. A sensitive treatment is also given in Fiori 1991b, pp. 129–30.

been partly responsible for the deterioration in their relationship because he believed that Giulia was stronger and did not want that image of her to be broken by an excess of tenderness. 'I am torn between a feeling of immense tenderness for you who appear to me as a weakness that must be immediately comforted with a physical caress, and a feeling that a great effort of will is necessary on my part to persuade you from afar [...] that you are nevertheless strong too and that you can and must overcome this crisis'. In May, he considers that the two of them are 'acquiring a wisdom that will become proverbial'. In August, on learning that Giulia has begun a psychoanalytic treatment, he begins to read Freud and relates the principles of psychoanalysis to his own insistence on the need to 'disentangle' one's own personality. From November to December, his emotions swing back and forth: he begins by telling Giulia that they have become phantoms for one another and he reproaches her for having contributed to his increased isolation; he then reveals his displeasure at having written in this manner; finally he reflects upon the bonds which unite them, which, in his opinion, are not only affective ones, but also ones of solidarity: 'Affection is a spontaneous emotion that does not create obligations because it stands outside the sphere of morality. [...] The bonds of solidarity are what we can and must rely on'.⁸¹

Some of the news reaching Gramsci from Moscow via Tatiana on the education of his sons and on relations within the family led him to be convinced that Giulia herself was a victim of the 'Schucht family system'. He already knew at this point through Tatiana that the obstacle to Giulia's coming to Italy was not only her illness, but also the resolute opposition of her father and her sister, Eugenia. In spite of all of this, Gramsci's suspicions of that 'other wall' being built around him in order to isolate him did not resurface in those months in which, moreover, he was engaged in very intense intellectual activity in the writing of the notebooks.

Perhaps his suspicions would have been kept at bay were it not for the intervention of that other element which Gramsci was unable to keep distinct from his consideration of his own feelings: the political and ideological factor – i.e. those issues which he was unable to bring up with Giulia by letter given his circumstances at the time. This third factor is equally important for an understanding of the trajectory of Gramsci's thinking in Turi de Bari. His disagreement with the tactics of the International vis-à-vis 'social-fascism', which were supported at the time by the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy, led

81 Letters to Giulia Schucht, 9 February 1931; 18 May 1931; 31 August 1931; and 7 December 1931 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 11, 36, 64 and 111 respectively.

him to enter into conflict with his own comrades in prison.⁸² Gramsci was always very reticent on this point when asked for his opinion by those outside prison, but he had some knowledge of the forms of action that were being taken in the Soviet Union: 'Stalin is a despot', a witness reports him as having said in prison. It was the awareness that he was in a minority, and that in practice he had no room for manoeuvre, which brought on his tendency to retreat into himself and allowed the suspicion to grow in his mind that something more than the amnesia and blackouts of Giulia was being concealed from him.

There has sometimes been the tendency to attempt to reduce the tragedy of Gramsci in prison to this last determinant, to the political or politico-ideological factor. This is comprehensible given that, in formal terms, Gramsci had gone to prison as the General Secretary of the Communist Party, and had in fact been convicted on this basis. Furthermore, the somewhat cryptic or Aesopic form in which he himself was to refer to the interrelation between affective and political problems in the following months has given rise to no little conjecture and, of course, much politically interested speculation in this regard, such as on his 'definitive' split with Togliatti, his dissidence within contemporary communism, and the 'betrayals' by his supposed political friends. In light of the documentation available today and the long-awaited testimony of Piero Sraffa, it can now be said that all this speculation is unfounded: neither was there a 'definitive' split with Togliatti, nor an 'additional' sentence, nor any dissidence, beyond the trivial sense of expressing one's own thinking within the terms of convictions that are held in common. Gramsci's obsessions and his misfortune are much better understood in terms of the interrelation of the three factors mentioned above: his illness, emotional complications, and ethico-political preoccupations (understanding 'political' in the restricted – tactical or organisational – sense).

Hopes and Obsessions

In August 1932, like almost every summer, Gramsci is not feeling well. He writes a few letters to Giulia in which he expresses his gratification at the progress that she is making in overcoming her illness. However, he then immediately tells

82 Gramsci criticised the tactics of the International as unrealistic, rejected the sectarian idea that Social Democracy was becoming fascist, postulated that there would be a period of transition when Fascism fell and declared himself in favour of the Constituent Assembly, 'although not as an end, but as a means'. The essentials of this disagreement are dealt with in Spriano 1988, pp. 47 ff.

her not to count too much on him because he feels that he has reached old age prematurely, he feels irascible, hypercritical, dissatisfied with everything and everyone, and that he is starting to live an animal and vegetative existence.⁸³ He then promptly communicates to Tatiana that he doubts whether he can be the correspondent that Giulia wishes for, because his capacity for resistance is close to breaking point. Gramsci now believes that he must soon take an important decision if he wants to stop himself from going mad or entering into a phase in which he will be unable to control himself. Analysing himself, he arrives at the following conclusion: 'I am losing control of my impulses and of my elementary temperamental instincts'.⁸⁴

As the summer advances and temperatures rise accordingly, Gramsci's irritability grows. He writes to Giulia in a manner which is curt and abrupt, he threatens to break off his correspondence with Tatiana, and then, when summer has passed, he apologises, explaining that he is going through a period of unremitting obsessions and 'neurasthenic frenzies'. At this point the possibility of an amnesty is announced in Italy. Gramsci does not get his hopes up, because he does not want to become disillusioned later; instead he reprises his favourite maxim: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. He then translates it for the case in hand: he has accepted that he has been sentenced to death in prison, but this does not mean that he is prepared to give up or to allow himself to be swept away by the current like a dead dog.

In this context, on 14 November 1932, Gramsci informs Tatiana, with a certain solemnity and much preamble, of something that he says that he has been pondering for some time: he intends to divorce Giulia. He does not pose this as being purely an emotional matter or indicate that he has fallen out of love with her; rather he refers to it as an option which other married prisoners have taken up before him. He adduces a moral argument: a living being should not remain bound to a dead or nearly dead person. As such, he proposes to 'release' Giulia from the ties which bind her to him, and, furthermore, he would like to do it 'through mutual agreement'. He asks Tatiana for advice as to whether it would be better for her to communicate this to Giulia or to do it himself directly, although, for the same moral reasons, he says that he is sure of one thing: the initiative has to come from him. Here Gramsci claims that he has weighed up the consequences, the pain and the suffering that he and Giulia would have to endure. He considers that, at her age, Giulia can still create a new life for

83 Letters to Giulia Schucht, 9 and 15 August 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 197 and p. 200 respectively.

84 Letters to Tatiana Schucht, 15 and 29 August, 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 198 and p. 202 respectively.

herself, and that, were she to accept his proposal, he would then retreat into his 'Sardinian shell'. However, before reaching this point, he warns Tatiana that she must not think that he has gone crazy or that what he is suggesting is a whim or irresponsible behaviour. He also suggests, somewhat obscurely, that he has other reasons which he cannot explain by letter and 'perhaps I would not even tell you in person'.⁸⁵

The discussion with Tatiana on this matter in the following weeks sheds much light on the type of relationship that Gramsci has established between feelings and reason. When she objects that the way that he feels is not in keeping with the circumstances, Gramsci responds that it is not a matter of 'feeling' in the immediate sense of the word, but of something which is thought, meditated upon, reasoned, that is, a feeling which is not predicated upon emotional impulses or instinctive passions, but upon a long meditation which has been undertaken calmly and coolly. When Tatiana does not reply, he insists that he is counting on her help in order to persuade Giulia to accept his point of view. Meanwhile, he does not communicate his idea to Giulia, but he vaguely insinuates to her that he will write to her on the theme of 'beginning' or 'beginning again' after he has reached an agreement with Tatiana, who 'has been a bit obstructive' and is keeping him in suspense.⁸⁶

When Tatiana finally gives Gramsci her arguments against his proposal, he responds with a furious letter on 5 December 1932, in which he forbids her to argue with him, demands a 'yes' or a 'no' and proceeds to relate 'a painful truth': the examining magistrate for his trial was right when he warned him of the consequences of the strange letter from Ruggero Grieco.

Gramsci then abruptly cautions Tatiana that being well-intentioned and writing in an apparently affectionate manner can actually bring disaster upon the person being written to. He thus leaves an unanswered question: was Grieco's letter a criminal act or merely one of irresponsible indiscretion?⁸⁷

In January 1933, Gramsci again raised the matter with Tatiana Schucht in similar terms during several conversations when she visited him in prison in Turi. Face to face, and in the presence of the prison staff, Gramsci clarified the cryptic reference to his 'other reasons'. He was looking for a way to secure his release and feared that the carelessness or irresponsibility of his political

85 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 14 November 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 22–30.

86 Letter to Giulia Schucht, 28 November 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 234. In fact Gramsci never wrote to Giulia about this matter, although the idea of divorce would reappear once more, albeit in passing, in a letter of June 1933, when his illness had become critical; see Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 304–5.

87 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 5 December 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 236–9.

friends might foil his efforts. At the time, Gramsci placed his hopes on two different strategies: firstly, that he might be granted parole through legal means, based on the fact that he was the only imprisoned Italian deputy; and secondly, that diplomatic representations by the Russian embassy in Rome might obtain his release through an exchange of prisoners. He had higher hopes for the latter strategy, and he even indicated to Tatiana which Russian diplomats she should approach, and he told her that he was prepared to change his name and renounce his Italian citizenship. It was in the context of these hopes that his obsession gained such strength: as a consequence of the Grieco affair in 1928, he distrusted the way in which his 'Italian friends' behaved. In order that the means could be adapted to the end, he wanted the second strategy to be carried out secretly: nothing was to be revealed to these friends of his. Gramsci did not give names, but one of these friends was in fact in on the secret and was beyond suspicion: Piero Sraffa.⁸⁸

However, a month later, on 27 February, Gramsci insisted yet again on the matter and wrote the most distressing of his letters to Tatiana Schucht, and probably the most shocking of all of his letters from prison. In it, Gramsci begins by admitting that there were things that had caused him to become obsessive, but he flatly dismissed the possibility that psychological factors were determining his physical condition or vice versa. He gave a different reason: his previous preoccupation had been exacerbated because he had reached the conclusion that he himself would not be able to deal with the matter 'philologically', that is, by going to the sources and finding a plausible explanation of the facts. Here, he solemnly relates the letter from Ruggero Grieco to the development of his relationship with Giulia. He confessed that he might have committed errors in his relationship with her; yet, over and above these errors, he saw something in Giulia's behaviour with which he could not quite come to terms, or put his finger on. His suspicion took shape as follows:

Those who sentenced me belong to a much vaster organism, of which the [Fascist] Special Tribunal was only the external and material expression, which compiled the legal documents for the sentence. I must say that among these 'sentencers' there was also Julca, I believe, indeed I'm firmly convinced she was there unconsciously, and then there is a series of less unconscious people.⁸⁹

88 Tatiana Schucht wrote in detail on 11 February 1933 to Piero Sraffa about what Gramsci told her in these conversations. Her testimony is in Sraffa 1991, pp. 226 ff., and also in an appendix to Natoli 1990, pp. 250 ff.

89 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 27 February 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 276.

On reaching this point, the reader of Gramsci's correspondence is left as dumb-founded and perplexed as was the addressee of the letter, Tatiana Schucht. What is to be made of this? Without doubt, the most reasonable way to react would be to echo Piero Sraffa's response when he was given copies of these letters by Tatiana: 'Antonio's state of mind is very disconcerting: his last letter is striking for its absurdity. It is the document of someone who is ill'.⁹⁰ This was true enough. Despite Gramsci's insistence that he was dealing with the matter in a rational, practically-minded manner, and despite the emphasis that he placed on adapting the means to the end being pursued (to the point of hurting Tatiana, out of the belief that he was not capable of doing so), it is inexplicable that, in the course of several weeks, he should veer from one extreme to the other: first, in considering breaking ties with Giulia and retreating into his 'Sardinian shell'; then, in contemplating renouncing his nationality and going to live in Moscow with his loved ones in the event that he were released from prison; finally, within the same short period, in believing that Giulia, for whom he says he feels a considerable tenderness, might be one of his 'sentencers', even if an unconscious one.

In any case, this was not an occasional obsession or a temporary form of madness. Gramsci attached such significance to the incident that, when he reviews what has become of his life since his arrest and imprisonment, and identifies different periods of his life in prison, not only does he state that a critical and decisive phase in his existence had begun in 1933; he also omits to date the beginning of the previous phase to the time when his trial took place, or to the moment when he was transferred to the prison in Turi (where he still remained) once his trial was over, as would have been logical; instead he dates it to the very day on which he received the letter from Ruggero Grieco, as if this had been the proverbial 'black spot'.^{91†} In May 1933, he once again repeats his belief that the examining magistrate was right when he told him that it seemed that his friends were collaborating to keep him in prison for as long as possible.⁹²

90 Sraffa 1991, pp. 98 and 117.

91† The 'black spot' is a literary device employed by Robert Louis Stevenson in his novel, *Treasure Island*. In the book, pirates are presented with a 'black spot' as a pronouncement of a verdict of guilt and sentence of death.

92 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 16 May 1933, in Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 295; Gramsci and Schucht 1997, p. 1283; Lepre 1998, p. 191.

Hypothesis

Why does Gramsci implicate Giulia (whom he undoubtedly still loves and who has given him no other rational grounds for complaint other than her prolonged silences or the brevity of her letters) in that 'irresponsible indiscretion' or 'criminal act', thus making her one of his 'sentencers'? The chronological proximity of this letter to the other one in which Gramsci brings up the question of divorce has led some interpreters to answer this question with the hypothesis that Giulia and the Schucht family (or part of the family) residing in Moscow were on the other side in the communist debate of the early 1930s (and that they were perhaps close to Togliatti's position). According to this hypothesis, Gramsci is supposed to have become aware of this fact, tied up the loose ends, and arrived at the correct conclusion: some of the communist leaders were consciously hostile to him, and Giulia was unconsciously so. However, this conjecture proves insubstantial when it is pointed out that, in the same letter referred to above, and above all in the conversations that he had with Tatiana, Gramsci told her not to speak of this matter with anyone *other than Piero Sraffa*, and Gramsci knew perfectly well that Tatiana and Piero Sraffa were his connection to the leadership of the Communist Party in exile.

Is there any evidence that Gramsci's suspicion was correct, and that the leading group of the Communist Party, and with it (albeit unconsciously) Giulia Schucht, betrayed Gramsci, or ought we rather to consider that this was an obsession on Gramsci's part, an unfounded suspicion? Umberto Terracini, another of the communist prisoners who also received Grieco's letter at the same time, has been very explicit in this regard: 'Gramsci's suspicion always seemed incomprehensible to me'.⁹³ This is also the opinion of the historian Paolo Spriano, who has studied the matter in detail, and of Valentino Gerratana, whose judgement is based on the documentation provided by Piero Sraffa, the person in the best position to know, given his contacts with both sides.

93 Terracini in Paulesu Quercioli (ed.) 1977, pp. 118–19. G. Fiori has reconstructed the context of this suspicion, reaching the conclusion that Gramsci let himself be taken in by the suggestion of one of the examining magistrates of the court case, the military magistrate Enrico Macis, a fellow Sardinian; cf. Fiori 1991a, pp. 10 ff. Nor was Gramsci especially perspicacious when, in September 1933, being already very ill and having been given a firm and reliable diagnosis, he gave a certain amount of credence to the insinuation by Saporito, medical inspector of prisons, that his illnesses were principally psychological and that they derived from the impression of having been abandoned by those close to him; cf. his letter to Tatiana Schucht, 3 September 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 322.

There remains, of course, the question of the 'irresponsible indiscretion' of 1928 and the fact that in political matters, as in everything else, Gramsci always thought for himself, whether in 1926, 1928, 1930 or 1933. Thinking for oneself has always been a cross to bear, both inside and outside the Communist Parties. The burden is heavier still in prison. Furthermore, there are no Cyrenians in prison to carry the cross. There is little doubt that Gramsci had his Cyrenians outside. However, his moral rigour ('even in kindness it is necessary to be practical'), his way of understanding rationality in personal relationships ('my way of acting and of expressing feelings must be rational and rationalised'), and his strong-willed character ('the concrete will is everything', he had written) confused him at times.

Moreover, there remains Piero Sraffa's judgement in relation to absurdity and illness. This judgement can be expanded upon. In order to do so in an illuminating way, given the distance afforded by the passage of time, it is necessary to make clear distinctions between 1) what Gramsci believed; 2) the rational basis for his obsessions; 3) the reasons why, on this rational basis, mere suspicion was able to be transformed into obsession; 4) the historiographical reconstruction of what was really occurring in the other world, the 'vast and terrible world', the world external to prison; 5) that which, in the judgement of the biographer or historian, would have constituted more appropriate behaviour in those circumstances. Leaving counterfactuals to one side, one of the problems which arises when the attempt is made comprehensively to rethink critical periods like the one which Gramsci experienced between 1932 and 1933 is that it is hard, or even very hard, to differentiate between these factors. The consequence of this is that Gramsci's obsession, which did not prevent him from continuing to think and write in an illuminating way (it is worth noting that several of Gramsci's letters referred to here are excellent in form), becomes *our* obsession.

In this regard, however, it is important to state from the outset, so as not to remain trapped within this obsession, that from the moment in which Gramsci received help (not only through his correspondence, but also the help afforded by the presence of others), and at least found the rest that he needed in the clinics to which he was transferred, his obsessions began to dissipate. The problem consisted in the fact that what Gramsci called 'concrete help', before his illness became critical in March 1933, depended excessively on his will to resist and his reliance on his own moral strength, a force of will which could not match the extent of his illness. Thus, in those months (and even afterwards, albeit less forcefully), he rejected as an 'irresponsible indiscretion' any attempt to help him which would imply a loss of his moral self-image, or

which could be interpreted by others as a concession or as a capitulation on his part. This was Gramsci's reaction not only to proposals by his relatives that he appeal for clemency, and to the unsuccessful attempts to organise an exchange of prisoners, in which cases his attitude was reasonable and comprehensible; he also responded in this way when it came to requesting medical help, which was to have much more serious consequences for him.

This alternative hypothesis already implies that, in order to understand Gramsci's evolution from the outside, it is not enough to remain at the level of the purely political, and that more importance must instead be accorded to other factors. These include the devastating effect on the connection between the affective and political dimensions of his life exerted by a serious illness which was poorly diagnosed and even more poorly treated; and the changes – which he believed to be irreversible – in certain of his character traits as a result of the development of this illness.

Molecular Transformation

One of the most striking things about the letters which Gramsci wrote to those close to him from the prison in Turi de Bari is the number of times that he uses the adverbs 'always' and 'never' when referring to his own character and convictions, and the vehemence with which he uses them. He sees himself as a man who has *always* been eminently practical; who has *always* been strong-willed, and who has *always* accorded a pre-eminence to the concrete will; who has *always* been a pessimist of the intellect and an optimist of the will, knowing that pessimism and optimism are simple, vulgar states of mind; who has *always* had limitless patience; who has *always* proposed goals to himself which were discrete and achievable out of an awareness of his own limitations; who has *never* been egotistical, because he has given at least as much as he has received over the course of his life; who has *always* known how to live in solitude and has *never* needed to draw on others for his moral strength in order to survive; who *never* speaks of the negative aspects of his life, and so forth.

As his illness advances, however, Gramsci's use of the words 'always' and 'never' start to be interspersed with rueful emendations or, more frequently, to be qualified by the use of the present perfect tense e.g. 'thus far I have been a certain way, but I can no longer be so'. In May 1932, he writes: 'I am a Sardinian without psychological complications'. However, he immediately corrects himself: 'Perhaps I should say that "I have been" a Sardinian without complications, because now possibly I no longer am; a certain dose of complication must have

perturbed me psychologically too'.^{94†} On 6 February 1933 he tells Tatiana that he can no longer be patient. Furthermore, on 29 May, when he has become aware of the seriousness of his illness, he even amends his favourite definition of himself: 'Until a while ago I was, so to speak, a pessimist of the intellect and an optimist of the will. . . . Today I no longer think in this way'.^{95†}

This change in Gramsci is what is most moving for anyone following the evolution of a man whose life was defined by the will to resist and who wrote interesting notes simultaneously on political theory, philosophy, cultural traditions and philology. However, the psychological change occurring in Gramsci is undoubtedly best expressed by the comparison between his previous metaphors (evoking Nansen's sailors, or the observer of the aquarium) and the parable with which he attempts to describe his situation in March 1933, precisely one week before the seriousness of his illness was confirmed.

Here, Gramsci begins a reflection upon 'catastrophes of character'. He asks himself what needs to happen for normal people who have become the victims of a shipwreck to end up accepting the idea of cannibalism and putting it into practice. The answer that he gives to his own question is that a rapid process of 'molecular transformation' occurs during the shipwreck between the moment in which cannibalism presents itself as a pure hypothesis and the moment in which it becomes an immediate necessity for some: these people both are and are not the same people that perhaps we once knew. He concludes that cannibalism apart, something similar is happening to him: what he feels is a 'splitting of the personality', such that a part of himself observes the process, and the other part suffers it, with the peculiarity, in his case, that the observing part, which regulates self-control, is aware of the precariousness of its *own* state and anticipates that it will not be long before its own function disappears, with the consequence that his personality will then undergo a metamorphosis as he becomes a new individual with impulses, initiatives and modes of thinking which are distinct from those of the individual that he once was.

This is as far as the simile goes. The fact that this is one of the few things expressed in his letters which also appears in the notebooks – significantly under the heading 'autobiographical notes' – speaks volumes of the importance which Gramsci gave to this splitting of the personality and to catastrophes of character. This circumstance has been much alluded to since Valentino Gerratana drew attention to it. However, it has perhaps not been emphasised

94† Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 16 May 1932, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 174 [translation modified – N.G.].

95† Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 29 May 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 299–300 [translation modified – N.G.].

enough that the most troubling thing about this lucid, introspective parable, and at the same time what is most relevant for an understanding of the relation between a 'catastrophe of character' and the suspicions and obsessions referred to above, is the moral which Gramsci wants to draw from the story. In such a situation it would be reasonable to call for help at the moment of the shipwreck, and in any case before finding oneself heading inexorably towards 'cannibalism'. However, Gramsci infers a different conclusion from his introspective metaphor: 'for a certain period of time it is necessary for me not to write anything to anyone, not even to you [Tatiana], save for the bare, raw facts of existence'.⁹⁶ Furthermore, when Tatiana attempts to help the shipwrecked man by making an application to the special tribunal for a reduction of his sentence, he objects that she has not understood the meaning of the metaphor, because to take that form of action is tantamount to responding to the urgent need to come to the aid of a drowning man by attempting to find him a different occupation in which he would not be at risk of falling into the water.⁹⁷

Thus Gramsci reacted in the same way that he had done when the 'destabilising weight of the brain' became apparent to him in Turin: he isolated himself and concentrated on his studies. Moreover, it is no coincidence that when his illness became critical, he repeatedly made comparisons with situations (1916, 1922) that he believed to be similar in principle, in order to draw strength from his memory of his reaction to these moments. Despite the hours that he had dedicated to observing the evolution of his illness and the pages that he had devoted to transmitting his feelings, it took him a long time before he admitted that this time, in 1933, his problem was not only a nervous one. Even after he was given a serious diagnosis and had accepted the need to be transferred to a clinic, in the few moments that he experienced a certain remission from his illness, he once again entertained the deluded hope that it might be the vaguely defined 'cerebral anaemia' with which a doctor in Turin had once diagnosed him that was mainly responsible for his physical deterioration.

However, Gramsci's descriptions of his various ailments and afflictions, occasionally in great detail, indicated that something else was wrong. In these accounts, he first perceives his illness as something physical which he cannot control and which obliges him to make an effort that has an enormous psychosomatic effect on him. He then describes the main psychological consequence of this: obsession, or, the fact that suffering itself causes him to forget that 99 per cent of the adversity he has to endure is due to causes of *force majeure*,

96 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 6 March 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 279 [translation modified – N.G.].

97 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 6 July 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 308–9.

independent of his own will or that of the people that he loves, such that it always appears to him as if the remaining one per cent (the things said and done by his loved ones) were the sole or main cause of his woes.⁹⁸ Shortly afterwards, he recognises that he has entered a catastrophic phase of his life and it seems to him that he is going insane: he has episodes of weeping and fears that he will enter into a delirious phase. At this point, he introduces another important qualification: 'I did not believe that one's physical being could so overwhelm one's moral strength'. This is the beginning of the 'molecular transformation'. Nevertheless, he still continues to believe that the best thing for him in this case is isolation.⁹⁹

Finally, after his crisis in March and the visit of Doctor Arcangeli, Gramsci realises that his frequent insomnia, his headaches and his continual irritability must have another cause than the generic 'cerebral anaemia' of previous diagnoses. He now recognises that what is happening to him now is different from what he has had to suffer in years gone by. He feels as if he were 'electrified': he suffers from tremors, vomiting, convulsions, hallucinations, heart failure, seizures and twitches in his arms and legs. Even in these circumstances, it seems that Gramsci does not attach too much importance to his pulmonary tuberculosis or Pott's disease. His psychological state preoccupies him more and he is not quite able to establish a connection between his arteriosclerosis and what is going on in his brain, as if he himself were indeed engaged in a struggle, in the context of the 'cannibalistic' splitting of his personality, to prevent the individual that he has been up to that point being transformed into a 'new' and uncontrolled one. He then describes his own 'molecular transformation' with an analytic rigour which must have caused him yet more suffering: he writes that he is 'in a state of virtual psychic obsession from which I cannot free myself in any way; indeed all attempts in this direction (since evidently I still haven't lost my equilibrium) increase the obsession to the point of frenzy'.¹⁰⁰ When, in July 1933, Gramsci sees that none of the legal and diplomatic proceedings which had been initiated in order to procure his release look like they will be successful, however, he finally accepts the idea that his only chance of recovery would be to be transferred to a clinic, although not

98 Letters to Tatiana Schucht, 6 and 13 February 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 267 and 270 respectively.

99 He writes to Teresina that he yearns 'not to have any relations with anyone, to be forgotten by everyone and forget everything and to live the life of an animal in its den'; letter of 20 February 20, 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 274.

100 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 29 May 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 299.

without expressing his reservations at the cost. From that point on, he still had to endure four more months in prison.

Truth and Medicine

Gramsci continued to write a considerable number of letters from the clinics in which he spent the last years of his life; around 50 have been preserved, the majority of them dating from 1936 and 1937. Almost all of them are addressed to Giulia Schucht and their sons, Delio and Giuliano. Gramsci's written correspondence with Tatiana was almost completely discontinued because she could visit him every week in the clinic in Formia, and even more frequently when he was transferred to the Quisisana clinic in Rome. Piero Sraffa also visited him several times in Formia and in Rome.

During his stay in Formia, Gramsci's health did not improve. One of his kidneys, his lungs and his stomach were now affected by his illness, although the radiological examinations to confirm tuberculosis were negative. He was extremely weak, with a constant fever, he suffered blackouts, double vision, a very bloated stomach, acute pain in his joints, and he was still unable to sleep. A further medical examination clarified that his psychological problems, his cerebral atonia and what he called his 'neurasthenic crises' were secondary effects of his renal condition and his hypertension. However, the rest and the care that he was able to get in the clinic had a calming effect on him, as did the atmosphere there, which was so different from that of his prison cell. It was with a certain uneasiness, but without the obsessions of the previous year, that he followed the legal proceedings to obtain parole and the diplomatic negotiations for his release (which were resumed in 1934, although they were to prove fruitless).¹⁰¹

In 1934, the tables were turned in Gramsci's relationship with Giulia. Now it was Giulia who wrote to him, and Antonio who did not reply to her letters, leaving Tatiana to relay news from him to her sister. From this year, only one letter has been preserved, which was addressed to his mother. Gramsci was still unaware that his mother had died on 30 December 1932. When he found out, he was angry that the news had been hidden from him. In October, he was released on parole, and for the first time he was able to go out for walks in Formia. Before October, he had hardly been able to work on the notebooks, but

101 Cf. Ricchini, Melograni and Santucci 1988, pp. 26–9. Gerratana states that the diplomatic initiative of 1934–5 'did not get beyond ineffectual, routine bureaucratic procedures'; see his 'Gramsci e Sraffa', introduction to Sraffa 1991, p. liv.

in Formia he had once again drawn up plans: he reordered part of what he had written in prison in Turi and added some notes, reflections and commentaries. These reveal that he maintained his revolutionary convictions until the end.¹⁰²

After his transfer to the Quisisana clinic in Rome on 24 August 1935, Gramsci resumed his correspondence with Giulia. Here, despite feeling exhausted and very agitated, Gramsci repeats his motto (both for Giulia and for himself): *resist* and try to gain strength. He immediately finds similarities between his state of mind and hers, and it is on the basis of this impression that he repeatedly requests that she come to Italy to renew the bonds that had united them. Although these letters do not have the humorous quality of his earlier ones, nor are they dictated by the effusiveness of newfound love, they are serene and tender, they are free of the inhibition caused by the knowledge that they would be read by third parties, and occasionally their tone is reminiscent of the correspondence from Vienna: 'My dear, I have always waited for you, and you have always been one of the essential elements of my life, even when I had no precise news from you or received letters from you that were rare and without vital substance, and even when I did not write to you because I did not know what to write, how to write . . . I pour all my tenderness into what I am writing, though it does not appear so from the written words'.¹⁰³

Given Giulia's doubts about travelling to Italy, Gramsci feels that he ought not to impose a decision on her, or to prejudice her decision unduly, and that the best way to guarantee this would be to dispense with any morbid complications or obsessive sentimentalism. Thus he proposes the reunion in terms of friendship: 'I am a friend of yours, fundamentally, . . . and I truly need to speak to you as one friend to another, with great frankness and open-mindedness'. When months pass and Giulia still has not decided to travel, Gramsci feels dismayed: 'I too must make certain decisions and I've remained irresolute while waiting for a response from you, whether positive or negative'. It was against this backdrop, in June 1936, that Gramsci dared to convey to Giulia the bad thoughts that had passed through his mind during his years in prison. He repeated the question that he had asked himself at that time: 'Who has sentenced me to prison, that is, to lead this particular life in this particular way?' He gives an answer that is indicative of the enormous difference between a situation in which he is driven to pose this question by obsession, pain and the constrictions of prison, and one in which he asks it while being cared for

102 Information relating to Gramsci's life in Formia has been taken from the following sources: Schucht 1991; Gramsci and Schucht 1997; Sraffa 1991; detailed reconstructions are given in Natoli 1990, pp. 171 ff., and Lepre 1998, p. 230 ff.

103 Letter to Giulia Schucht, 14 December 1935, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 352–3.

by others as a free man, albeit one whose ill health has not improved. Gramsci now suggests, without bitterness, that he might have felt circumstances that were not the principal cause of the state in which he found himself more strongly than the main deed that actually led to his current predicament. He then cuts short his complaint with a formulation far removed from the one he used in his appalling letter to Tatiana in 1933: 'I am trying to tell you that your uncertainty determines my uncertainty and that you must be strong and courageous to give me all the help you can, just as I would like to do for you and unfortunately cannot'.¹⁰⁴

The Gramsci of this period, who is infirm but nonetheless a free man, toys with the idea of returning to his native Sardinia and thus definitively closing a whole cycle of his life. However, he does not wish to make a decision before he knows what Giulia is going to do. This attitude on the part of Gramsci affords an insight into his rationale when, some years previously, he had considered 'releasing her from her ties'. What was psychologically damaging to him then was that his life depended, in a bureaucratic sense, not only (and above all) on those from whom he could not expect any favours, but also on those from whom he did indeed anticipate something positive. In their correspondence in this new period, however, Giulia Schucht is not quite able to grasp what is meant by 'closing a cycle of life', and Antonio Gramsci is not quite able to find the way of conveying 'the profound sense' of what he wants to say. When she insinuates that she might go to Italy, he raises a difficulty: he feels weak, but he does not want to impose a course of action upon her or prejudice her decision. This gives rise to the final misunderstanding in this intimate relationship.

With this misunderstanding, the Gramsci of the categorical adverbs returns – the Gramsci who, in intimate dialogue, does not wish to give any impression of moral weakness and takes things to extremes. He worries that when he speaks of retiring to Sardinia, where his isolation would only increase, she might think that his feelings are expressive of a kind of 'historical' pessimism. This type of pessimism is not his own, even now. Furthermore, when Giulia says that she is sure that she will be able to speak to him about 'everything', he engages in polemic against this presumed certainty, and reaffirms his concept of truthfulness in the face of the comedy of errors:

I've always believed that truth bears within it its own medicine and is in all cases preferable to prolonged silence that, besides all else, is also offensive and degrading, because someone who doesn't speak about

104 Letters to Giulia Schucht, thought to be dated 25 January and 16 June 1936, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 354 and 357–8 respectively.

something that might provoke pain, seems to be convinced that the other party does not understand that silence also has a meaning, and is not likely to think that silence can hide things that are even more serious than those one is trying to conceal. Therefore truth, clarity, sincerity in our relationship.¹⁰⁵

'Truth bears within it its own medicine', indeed. When Tatiana visits the clinic and hands over to Gramsci the letters which Giulia wrote to him in the troubled year of 1933, he makes a connection between the fact that these missives were kept from him and the silence of those close to him about his mother's death; he briefly lets his feelings pour out, he touches on a reflection on the realm of 'missed opportunities', but immediately he declares that he is of a 'morbid hypersensitivity' and that he is unable to write on certain themes.¹⁰⁶ He then switches to talking about their sons. In January 1937, Gramsci makes his final attempt to persuade Giulia to travel to Italy. He now says that he feels that she is part of him, but that nothing can substitute for direct impressions. This is his final confession and his penultimate adverb, which this time is attributed to her in relation to him: 'I believe that you have *always* known that I have a great, a very great difficulty in externalizing my feelings and this explains many disagreeable things'.¹⁰⁷ In the last letter of his which has been preserved, from January 1937, Gramsci still emphasises words which have been essential in his life: '*I want*'. For his birthday he wants a beautiful photograph of her and their sons.¹⁰⁸

Gramsci's final months, like the rest of his life since 1922, were marked by the division of his soul between affects and politics, between love and revolution. He believed that revolutionary qualities cannot be reduced to mere rebellious instinct, but that they depend on that other kind of wanting – the affective and loving bond to really existing people – or, in other words, on the affective ties which unite the members of the oppressed classes and also those who do not belong to them, but feel a solidarity with them. This idea is not only one that Gramsci compulsively elaborated while falling in love with Giulia. It was

105 Letter to Giulia Schucht, thought to be dated 5 November 1936, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 364.

106 Letter to Giulia Schucht, undated, 1936, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 373 [translation modified – N.G.].

107 Letter to Giulia Schucht, thought to be dated 5 January 1937, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 376.

108 Letter to Giulia Schucht, thought to be dated 23 January 1937, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 376–7.

an idea that accompanied him to the end. When it was clear that Giulia was not going to travel to Italy, Gramsci asked Tatiana and his family in Sardinia to arrange to find him a house in Santu Lussurgiu, near the village where he was born. However, he then changed his mind. In April, in his last conversation with his friend Piero Sraffa, he expressed his wish to be expatriated to the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹ Sraffa made the formal request in Milan on 18 April. A week later, Gramsci suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and died.

109 Spriano 1988, p. 83.

The Ethico-Political Project of Antonio Gramsci

Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.
For we went, changing countries oftener than our shoes
Through the wars of the classes, despairing
When there was injustice only, and no rebellion.

And yet we know:
Hatred, even of meanness
Contorts the features.
Anger, even against injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

BERTOLT BRECHT, "To Those Born Later"¹

Coherence Between Saying and Doing

Antonio Gramsci was the most original Marxist communist in the interwar period and, probably, alongside Guevara, the most internationally acclaimed of the Marxist communists who lived in the twentieth century. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm recalled a few years ago that, during the 1980s, Antonio Gramsci had become the most frequently cited Italian thinker in the international humanities and social sciences.

Without doubt, this has an explanation. It is due, in the first place, to the fact that any sensitive person will find his biography moving; and, secondly, it can be attributed to the great interest aroused in many countries of the world by three collections of his writings: the political and politico-cultural interventions of the period from 1916–26; the 33 notebooks, known as the *Quaderni del carcere*, that he compiled during the long period in prison to which he was sentenced by Mussolini's Fascist régime; and the more than 500 letters that he

¹ Bertolt Brecht, "To those born later": Brecht 1987, p. 318. The poem is reproduced in full in Appendix 1 of this volume.

sent to family and friends from 1927 to 1937 from those prisons and from the clinics where he was forced to spend the last part of his life.

Today, however, a young European wishing to read Gramsci calmly and with dedication can come up against the problem that his works are not available in the main bookshops. Even in Italy, Gramsci's own country, there was paradoxically a moment, towards the end of the 1990s, in which the main edition of Gramsci's writings, the critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*, compiled in the 1970s by Valentino Gerratana, and published by Einaudi, was not to be found in bookshops. It took an international campaign by Gramsci scholars for the situation to improve at all. Moreover, in other European countries in which Gramsci has been widely read, for example in Spain, it is currently not easy to find editions of Gramsci's writings in bookshops.

This paradoxical situation can be explained by the suspicion aroused in general by the terms 'communist' and 'Marxist' in recent years. This has obviously had repercussions in the culture industry and in the book market. When something arouses suspicion, everything connected with it is affected, regardless of its value. Given that Gramsci was indeed a Marxist communist, it is logical that young people, who have been brought up with a suspicion and aversion towards everything that Marxist communism represented, will be predisposed to a certain reticence towards his work.

In the face of such situations, it is usually useless to attempt to indoctrinate young people from the rarefied cultural standpoint that Gramsci is a 'classical author' and that reading the classics ought to be compulsory. As the poet said, 'the worst thing is to believe that one is right because one once was'.² There are no mandatory classics.³ Even less so in a postmodern epoch in which the 'classical' authors of your canon tug at the beards of the 'classical' authors of my canon, and both sets are disqualified by the classical authors of someone else's canon. There have always been *outdated* classics, and situations in which a thinker acquires the status of a classical author that he or she did not have before. Montaigne, for example, did not usually figure among the almost mandatory classical authors a few decades ago; now he does. Karl Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind* will soon be a compulsory classic if the idea that there are 'humanitarian wars' takes hold as one century and millennium ends and another one begins, as seems to be the case.

For these reasons, then, an extra effort is required in order to gain access to the life and work of Antonio Gramsci today, and even more so if one is not a

2 Valente, 1980, pp. 202–3.

3 An acute reflection on the type of classical author that Gramsci represents is given in Gerratana 1997, pp. xi ff.

communist and Marxist, and thus already predisposed. What is needed is an interest in historical memory, a certain emotional sensibility and something of a spirit of compassion and sympathy toward the tragedy of the man and his history. These are three things that, to be sure, are not highly priced in the market of ethical values. For this reason, I believe that the best way to gain the goodwill of such a reader is to re-read together the verses of Bertolt Brecht's poem to the generations to come, to those not yet born, to the people of the future; these verses are to serve as a keynote for this commentary on Gramsci. They were written in the years that Gramsci was languishing in Mussolini's prisons and are a very good expression of the feelings of revolutionaries at the time.

The fact that there has been such a great convergence of opinions on Gramsci (and on Guevara) from the standpoint of very different lived experiences and over such a long period of time is due to something that we must emphasise straight away, however obvious it might seem: that which people from different cultural backgrounds admire and value in Gramsci (and Guevara) is the coherence between what they said and what they did. Even with the passing years, it is for this reason that they can still rightfully be considered living examples of those ethico-political ideals for which they fought.

What makes Gramsci such a universally appreciated figure in these difficult times for communism and for the various Marxisms? The answer lies in the fact that, even though he was a leader, he dedicated himself to the realisation of his ideas and his project, and was but one more person in the struggle; he did not exempt himself from what he advocated, nor did he try to rationalise ideologically, as others did, an exceptional status for the 'I myself' which claims to be a collective 'I', a 'we'. In order to appreciate this coming together of the 'I' and the 'we' in the person named Gramsci, it is sufficient to focus on his way of understanding the relation between spontaneous philosophising ('all men are philosophers', he wrote) and philosophy in the technical sense (a specific critical reflection on one's own practice, and on one's own conception of the world), or on his way of understanding the relation between intellectuals in a limited, traditional sense, and what he called 'the collective intellectual' (which of course has nothing to do with the trivialised media figure of the 'organic intellectual' who has no thoughts of his own).

The thought that the political party of emancipation is a collective intellectual, in which the quintessential traditional intellectual, instead of being diluted or accorded too much importance, is transformed into a productive intellectual, an intellectual who produces alongside others, alongside the manual workers who want to liberate themselves – such a thought can only occur to a man who offers himself up to others as the organic part of a collective

ideal and entity, and who gives his life up to the fulfilment of this promise. For it can be said of such a man that he has renounced that which is characteristic of the traditional intellectual: his attachment to social privilege. One of the most interesting contributions of Gramsci in this regard was precisely his proposal, in the context of the secular party, to overcome the type of relation (which is unilateral and unidirectional) between 'clergy' and 'laypeople' which characterised the Catholic Church, and which almost all modern political parties inherited and secularised.

The thought that all human beings are philosophers (which, in principle, is a thought alien to the specialist, to the expert or to the philosophy graduate) can only occur to a man who attaches more importance to philosophising understood as reflection on one's own practice and traditions than to academic philosophies, and who, moreover, puts himself at the service of others in order to raise spontaneous philosophy to the level of enlightened common sense. Such a man has renounced his privilege as a technical philosopher in favour of a different type of philosophising – namely a philosophising from the standpoint of an explicit intention to support the collectivity of the subaltern.

The thought that politics and morality will one day constitute a whole where politics flows into morality can only occur to a man who, without affectation, condescension or elitist pretensions, has accepted the conflict between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility as a cross which necessarily has to be borne in a divided society. For such a man, even though he says that he feels isolated and repeats again and again that he is *an island within an island*, and feels like one, is in reality communicating to everyone else, to his interlocutors and his readers, that he wants to form a continent with them in spite of his own psychological condition, his character or his state of mind.

For all these reasons, and from the standpoint of the present, Gramsci's project can be understood as a continuous attempt to transform (communist) politics into an ethics of the collective.

Gramsci did not write a treatise on normative ethics. He was neither an academic philosopher, nor a typical politician especially preoccupied by his own image. Nor did he give the pages of his brilliant work the title of 'moral and political philosophy' – which is how the subject is normally taught in universities. He dedicated very few pages to clarifying his own concept of ethics. Like so many other great thinkers, he spoke and wrote little of ethics. In reality, he only did so polemically, when it was clear to him that politics was being confused with political intrigue, politics in the noble sense of the word with sectarian or *Mafigioso* practices. He gave a lesson in ethics with his life. This was a lesson of the kind that remains in people's memory and ends up permeating their very psychological fabric, and which later serve to configure collective

beliefs. *Ideas that coalesce into beliefs* – this was an aspiration of Gramsci's, since he was a young man, within the framework of a critical tradition, and in relation to an alternative identity to that of the existing order, an identity already prefigured in this divided society.

When speaking of the relation between ethics and politics, there are two equally interesting aspects that are suggested by Gramsci's writings and by his actions. One of these comes into focus when we ask ourselves about the form in which he himself lived the relation between politics and morality, especially during the prison years, when he was suffering from illness, but refused to request a pardon from Mussolini. The other interesting dimension emerges when we consider Gramsci's reflections on the relation between the sphere of ethics and that of politics, and the positions he advanced in this connection on the basis of these reflections. This is a theme that Max Weber had already considered some years before Gramsci in modern terms, in terms of a consciousness already disenchanted with the other forms of doing politics. Gramsci, a historicist, dealt with it in a different manner, establishing a dialogue with Machiavelli and with Kant, but orienting his thought to the specific, concrete problems of his time.

These two aspects have rarely been considered together in the already immense literature on Gramsci.⁴ However, despite this fact, it is important to give attention to both of them, and to open a discussion on the implications of thinking them both together. The reason for this is as substantive as it is practical: the aim is to overcome the usual distance, or even the separation which is deliberately established, where Gramsci is concerned, between biographical studies and technical, academic enquiries centring on the basic concepts of the *Quaderni del carcere*. The consequences of this thematic separation are usually the recognition of the ethical coherence of an exemplary life on the one hand, and, on the other, a dissatisfaction at Gramsci's theorisation of the connection between ethics and politics, above all in comparison with other authors who were his contemporaries, whether academic or not.

Where this separation in intellectual *milieux* leads is well known. I will state it in the most drastic way possible. It leads, in terms of the evaluation of Gramsci, to a judgement of the following tenor, which is often heard in recent years: 'Here we have someone whom we can consider an example of moral coherence in the framework of the communist tradition, and who, nevertheless, made a tragedy out of his own life, and contributed to the tragedy of

4 Compare the treatments in Tortorella 1997, and in Jervolino, 'Etica e politica in Gramsci', in Baratta and Liguori (eds.) 1999, pp. 199–210.

others, precisely because he was not able to develop an adequate conception of the relation between the ethical and the political'.

I would like to state at once, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, that I do not accept this intellectualist differentiation in relation to Gramsci, and that I consider that the tragedy of his life (like that of some other communists of his time) has to be understood in part as an expression of his circumstances, of the general drama of Western communism in a 'century of extremes' (Hobsbawm),⁵ in which many people in Western Europe were obliged to live as 'revolutionaries without a revolution', in full knowledge of this fact, with convictions but without hope. The tragedy of Gramsci has also to be understood partly as a result of his extremely particular personality: he was sceptical, but strong-willed; he was ironic, but intransigent; he was as practical in everyday matters as he was inclined, sometimes to the point of neurosis, to a fastidiousness in emotional relationships. There are sufficiently expressive demonstrations of these traits in Gramsci's own correspondence and in the testimonies left by those who knew him personally.

It is true that Gramsci emphasised the strictly political dimension in the exposition of his project, as much in relation to the social struggles in which he participated as when analysing or proposing theoretical hypotheses. However, this does not mean that his project was politicist, or that he undervalued ethics. Symptomatically, he always presented his own convictions as forming part of a *politico-ethical project*, and it is in this sense that his reiterated proposal of moral and intellectual reform, which is consubstantial with this project, must also be understood.⁶

Moral Idealism

Before his arrest and imprisonment by Mussolini's Fascist régime, between the beginning of the First World War and November 1926, Gramsci had developed an intense activity as a cultural critic and political revolutionary in Turin, Moscow, Vienna and Rome. The six volumes into which Gramsci's writings of that period have been grouped are testimony to that life of febrile dedication to alternative politics, to the cause of socialism and communism (in a Europe torn between war and revolution). In 1921, when the Communist Party of Italy was founded, Gramsci was known above all as a theorist of the most interesting alternative socio-political experience of the twentieth century in the

5 Hobsbawm 2010.

6 Coutinho 2001.

peninsula, the experience of the Turin factory councils which had managed to occupy the FIAT plants for some time.

Between 1919 and 1922, Gramsci wrote a considerable number of notable political articles in the socialist and communist newspapers of the period – in *Il grido del popolo*, in *La città futura*, in *Avanti*, and above all in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, a weekly paper in which he was a contributor and director. In *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci undertook a new kind of political journalism: informed, cultivated, polemical and veracious at the same time, his was a political journalism which was acclaimed not only in socialist circles, but also among liberals and libertarians in Turin. The renown of *L'Ordine Nuovo* extended beyond borders and reached Spain, for example, where Joaquín Maurín was already writing about Gramsci in those years.

The young Gramsci, who was very spontaneous in his political activity, and was characterised as a Bergsonian, a Sorelian and a voluntarist by some of his comrades of the time, was idealist when it came to morality, and a harsh critic of the existing trade unions (which he considered part of the culture established under capitalism).

An idealist when it came to morality, and a harsh critic of the existing trade unions: this is my characterisation of Gramsci, and I would like to emphasise these two aspects here, because moral idealism is usually dismissed in an off-hand manner, and those people who, going against the grain, dare to criticise the supine behaviour of trade-union leaderships, are often disqualified (with the argument that they are not left wing, or that they are in league with the Right). The historical truth is just the opposite of what can habitually be read in the media: like all great revolutionaries that there have been in the world (starting with Marx), Gramsci criticised the established trade unions, proposed their political renovation, and theorised other forms of workers' organisation and activity, in particular the factory councils.

Piero Gobetti, a great humanist and one of the true Italian liberals (unlike those who call themselves neoliberals today), left us the following suggestive portrait of the young Gramsci, theorist of the factory councils:

Gramsci divided his activity between study and political propaganda. It is curious that he found himself absorbed by politics, when at university he had contented himself with acute and refined glottological research. . . . He was, and continues to be, animated by a great moral fervour, and is somewhat disdainful and pessimistic, such that, on speaking with him for the first time, he gives the impression that he has a sceptical outlook on life. . . . He is intransigent, and a man who takes sides, sometimes in an almost ferocious manner; he is also critical of his own com-

rades, not out of a desire to polemicise in personal or cultural matters, but rather due to an insatiable need to be sincere.⁷

'Moral fervour', 'pessimistic scepticism' and an 'insatiable need to be sincere': here we have the key for understanding the young Gramsci. Those of his contemporaries who accused him of voluntarism and idealism were unable to grasp the difference between the idealism of 'beautiful souls' and the revolutionary moral idealism of the thinker and man of action who is committed to collective politics. This difference can be expressed quite simply with a sentence spoken by the great scientist and moralist of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, about Walter Rathenau:

It is of no merit to be an idealist when one lives in the clouds; but he was an idealist who lived down on Earth, whose odours he knew better than almost anyone.⁸

The positive moral idealism of the young Gramsci is of the second type. It is the idealism of a man who knows that he is not living in a wonderland, who is already acquainted with the stench of this divided world, this world of inequalities, but who, nonetheless, aspires above all to create a 'club of moral life', and then dedicates the majority of his time to the moral and intellectual reform of his contemporaries.

In this respect there are at least five aspects of the written work of Antonio Gramsci between 1916 and 1926 which deserve attention in some detail. The first of these is his notion of 'culture'; the second is his concept of 'utopia'; the third, his particular interpretation of the Russian Revolution of 1917; the fourth, his arguments in favour of the factory councils; the final one is his analysis of the 'Southern question' in Italy.

7 Gobetti 1960. Gobetti, who had published the Turin journal *Energie nuove* between 1918 and 1919, subsequently collaborated with the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group, of which Gramsci was a member. In 1922, he founded the extremely interesting weekly journal, *La rivoluzione liberale*, in which he developed an intense antifascist engagement. Exiled in Paris, he died in 1926. It is his role that Gramsci singles out among Italian intellectuals of the period in 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' in Gramsci 1977, pp. 441–2. Paolo Spriano wrote an excellent portrait of Gobetti in Spriano 1977.

8 Cited by Rowe and Schulmann 2007, p. 123 (translation modified – N.G.).

Culture

In 1916, Gramsci was 25 years old, and his soul was divided between philology – his studies of the history of the Italian language and literature – and political journalism. He was already a member of the Italian Socialist Party. Italy had entered the War, and socialists were divided in all of Europe on the question of which position to take with respect to the War. This was the case in Italy too. Initially, in 1914, Gramsci had held a very particular position in this respect: he was in favour of neutrality, but not *any* neutrality. He supported not ‘absolute’ neutrality (which was the position on the War adopted by the leadership of the Italian Socialist Party), but rather an ‘active and operative’ neutrality. In this, he had coincided partially with one of the most active representatives of the left or maximalist wing of the Italian Socialist Party up to 1914, Benito Mussolini. The expression itself – ‘active and operative neutrality’ – had been Mussolini’s, though he soon substituted it with excoriating criticism of any neutrality and the active defence of interventionism.⁹

In Italy, as in Germany and England, the evolution of the European war generated patriotic fervour on the one hand, and radical anti-militarisms on the other. In 1914, Gramsci was in the middle, and was divided. Mussolini soon left the Italian Socialist Party and began to defend Italian military expansion (in Albania, Africa, and on the border with Austria): this was a nationalism which had the peculiarity at the time that it presented itself as anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, anti-liberal and anti-parliamentarian; it was a nationalism which was expressed in terms very similar to those used by revolutionary socialists, and even by anarchists,¹⁰ but which, unlike the latter, exalted militarism and

9 Gramsci’s article, ‘Neutralità attiva ed operante’, was published in *Il grido del popolo*, 31 October 1914. Cf. A. Gramsci, ‘Active and Operative Neutrality’, in Gramsci 1977, pp. 6–9. In 1914, Benito Mussolini was the director of *Avanti*, a socialist newspaper. Renzo de Felice has written on his influence on the young socialists of the time: de Felice 1965. As early as December 1914, in a speech he gave in Parma, Mussolini spoke against neutrality in general and in favour of interventionism and the War. The equivocation which this created among the young socialists of the time was due to the following positions taken by Mussolini: he proclaimed himself an ‘exasperated socialist’, an ‘anti-reformist’, a ‘revolutionary’; he presented pacifism and neutralism as things for priests and bourgeois; and he defended his patriotic and interventionist thesis by (mis)quoting Marx, ‘the old Pan-Germanist’, as Mussolini called him.

10 On 6 April 1920, Benito Mussolini wrote: ‘I am in favour of the individual and against the State. Down with the State in all its forms and whatever its incarnation: the State of the past, present and future, the bourgeois State and the socialist one! All that is left for us, the last survivors of individualism, in the dark present and the gloomy future, is the

patriotic virtues. This was not that uncommon at the time, in a time of war. Some of the best-known exponents of Italian futurism underwent a similar evolution, starting with Marinetti, who wrote poems glorifying war and the beauty of weapons, and who intended at the same time to address himself to the factory workers, because he was fascinated by the world of machines and mass production. Here we can see one of the deepest origins – a socio-cultural one – of what would subsequently end up becoming state fascism, or institutional fascism, once the War was over and attempted revolutions had failed, and with the crisis of the liberal system.¹¹

Gramsci, who was simultaneously interested in contemporary avant-garde manifestations of high Italian culture, such as Pirandello's plays and futurism, and in popular culture, followed a different path in these years. At that time, Gramsci was politically an internationalist, but with deep Sardinian roots. Although he lived in Turin and had begun to feel a connection with the Turin workers' movement, he maintained relations with various agitators of the autonomist movement of the island of Sardinia at the same time. As he says in a letter written years later, at that time he had made the slogan of this autonomist movement, whose goal was autonomy vis-à-vis the Italians of the peninsula, his own: 'Let's drive the continentals into the sea!' It should be taken into account that this was an autonomism of the poor, of a people from the South, who considered themselves abandoned and exploited by the central Roman administration. This was something comparable to the historical autonomism of the Canary Islanders vis-à-vis the *godos* – the Spaniards of the Iberian peninsula.

In that historic moment, the dividing line between 'autonomism' and 'pro-independence' was not clear, and in Italy, what separated the industrial North from the peasant South was fundamentally the social question: the great differences existing in terms of the way of life. Thus the young Gramsci was an internationalist socialist who identified as an islander and an immigrant. So it is from this perspective that he reflects on socialism and culture. He aspires to a culture which is both 'cultivated', so to speak, and popular. In this context, 'popular' means 'of the popular classes' – of the proletariat and the impoverished peasants. Gramsci considered, moreover, that acculturation, or cultural education, is a substantial part of moral reform, and that it is culture that makes us better morally.

absurd but always consoling religion of anarchy'. Shortly earlier, Mussolini had sent a telegram of congratulations to Malatesta on the latter's return to Italy. See Valeri, 1962, p. 109.

11 I engage with this issue in Fernández Buey 1977.

Culture is still a polymorphous and slippery concept today. Already in 1916, there were various competing conceptions of culture, and not only in Italian society. As Gramsci aspires simultaneously to a 'cultivated' and an autonomous culture of the subaltern classes, he turns his eyes to the classical locus where this aspiration was formulated historically: the passage from the Enlightenment to Romanticism. In elaborating his concept of culture, then, he takes inspiration from a German Romantic, Novalis, and an atypical Enlightenment thinker, the father of historicism: G.B. Vico, the author of *The New Science*. Taking his lead from these thinkers, and allying himself with them, Gramsci maintains the idea that the basic problem of culture is how to cultivate one's own 'I', how to achieve autonomy both on the level of the individual and in collective life. On this basis, Gramsci proposes a reinterpretation of the classical aphorism (adopted by Socrates from Solon), 'know thyself', in terms of personal and social realisation.¹²

This was very atypical in the Italian socialist movement of the period, which, in general, drew inspiration from the classics of its own tradition (Marx and Engels, Proudhon, Fourier, Cabet, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Antonio Labriola) or from the encyclopaedic sources of the Enlightenment. With his focus on the subaltern classes, particularly the workers, Gramsci aspires to a different culture, an alternative culture: one which is not reduced to the reading of the classics of one's own tradition, nor one which amounts to a mere accumulation of knowledge. To put it differently, Gramsci opposes the form that encyclopaedic knowledge had progressively assumed inside and outside the universities as a deformation of the initial project of the French Enlightenment; he criticises the superficial culture of those who know a little of everything and pass themselves off as sages. For Gramsci, this form of culture has degenerated, both in the university and on the streets: in the former case, it results in mere erudition; in the latter, in pedantry.

He defines culture, on the other hand, as 'organisation, a discipline of one's inner 'I', the taking possession of one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher consciousness through which one can comprehend one's own historical value, one's function in life, one's rights and obligations'.¹³ He relates this aspiration to the fact, which for him is indisputable, that the human being is above all spirit, historical creation, and not nature. What Gramsci proposes, then, is an extension to the field of socialism of that which was represented historically by the cultural and critical movement of the Enlightenment which led to the French Revolution (and in this context he cites Diderot above all).

12 Gramsci, 'Socialism and Culture', in Gramsci 1977, p. 10.

13 Gramsci 1977, p. 11 [translation modified – N.G.].

The most salient features of the concept of culture which Gramsci proposes are twofold: critique and order. 'Critique', on the collective plane, means social critique, critique of the prevailing type of civilisation, the uncovering of what existing capitalism has represented and continues to represent, but also the knowledge and the consciousness of what one is and what one wishes to be as an alternative. For Gramsci, 'order' means discipline with regard to an ideal.¹⁴ For this, the individual human being needs to know others too, those closest to him: their history, their civilisation, their motives. When he says that culture is order and discipline, Gramsci is inverting the usual use of these two words. He says what he wants to say polemically: what exists, what is ordinarily called the 'existing order', is, in reality, disorder (social disorder and moral disorder), which is the reason why one should not let oneself be swept along by the rash argument that the subaltern classes must oppose the existing order, having recognised it as such, with disorder, or with direct and destructive action; rather, they must create a 'new order', a true one, a truly ordered and regulated world which is socially harmonious. This polemical reflection was the origin both of his proposal to create a 'club of moral life', and of the titles of two of the main publications in which he collaborated: *La città futura* and *L'Ordine Nuovo*.

Utopia

The inversion of the meaning of the word 'order', or rather, the recuperation of the true meaning of a term which is unilaterally appropriated by those in power, also leads Gramsci to invert the habitual sense in which the word 'utopia' was used during the years of the First World War. In order to do this, Gramsci does not refer back to etymology ('utopia' means, etymologically, non-place; and this non-place can be interpreted in opposite senses: negatively, as that which can never exist anywhere; positively, as what ought to exist if the world were ordered and harmonious). Instead, he once again discusses and polemicises with his contemporaries on the basis of the interpretation of recent or current political and social events, and proceeds accordingly to suggest a reconstruction of the uses of the word throughout history.

The intention of radically changing the world, of transforming it in an egalitarian, socialist sense, as expressed in the anthem of *The Internationale*, is commonly vulgarly identified with utopia. The word itself became corrupted or tainted with the imposition of the standpoint that any proposal of transformation, of radical change of the world in which we live, is utopian, is a utopia – a

14 The best reconstruction of the notion of 'order' in Gramsci's work is still Sacristán 1998.

fantasy, a *chimera*. For this reason, Gramsci starts by distinguishing the historical sense that utopia had from the Renaissance onwards, and above all in the nineteenth century, from the contemporary habitual use of the word. Historically, utopia meant the projection into the future of a foundation for social organisation which would dispel the impression of a leap into the void for the subaltern classes, for the poor and the proletarians. However, what makes the aspiration to the ideal of a new order utopian, Gramsci argues, is not the (egalitarian) moral principle which leads to this aspiration, but rather *the analytic excess in the formulation of the ideal, the excess of detail* in relation to what the ideal city ought to look like, and in relation to the society of the future – in other words, the pretension to a basis in an infinite amount of facts (which are incalculable, given that it is the future which is being considered), instead of establishing a basis in a sole moral principle, in function of which action is then taken. What makes the ideal a utopia is the pretension of being able to foresee more than that which can reasonably be anticipated by humankind, given that it is the future which is in question.

The defect of utopias, one which Gramsci calls ‘organic’, lies wholly in the belief that foresight can be had in relation to facts, when it would be more reasonable to consider that prognoses in socio-political and socio-cultural questions can only be made in terms of principles or juridical maxims. Juridical maxims (for Gramsci, right, or *ius*, signifying morality enacted, or morality in action) are the creation of human will. If the goal is to give this collective will a specific direction, it is necessary to focus on the only thing that can constitute such a direction; for otherwise, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, all the attention to detail, or the excess of detail anticipating the organisation of the future, will have the effect that peoples’ resolve will wilt and be dissipated, the individual and collective will wane, and initial enthusiasm will be transformed into mere illusion, or even into sceptical or pessimistic disillusionment.

This Gramscian concept of ‘utopia’ clashes with the two accepted senses of utopia which were prevalent at the time in the socialist movement. One of them postulated the conversion of the ideal into an extremely detailed programme for the future, with the consideration that if the city and the society of the future were not carefully delineated with great attention to detail, those who had to transform the society of the present would not act, because it would seem to them that there were no guarantees, and they would become resigned. The other version postulated something along the lines of a definitive shift from utopia to science; it believed that it was in possession of such a superior science; it called its own conception ‘scientific socialism’; and it concluded, deterministically, that a proper application of this science would necessarily lead to a harmonious, regulated, socialist society, considering that

people would not change the world with fantasies about the future, but rather with knowledge of the laws of history in the same way that the laws of nature are known.

In this context, the Russian Revolution of October 1917 was an authentic test, a decisive historic test for proponents of both versions. In the face of events, some believed that the Russian Revolution really was a utopia, in the sense that it would be impossible to bring the socialist programme to a successful conclusion in an economically and industrially backward country, as was Russia at the time. Others thought that those events of 1917 represented precisely the confirmation that the true science (the Marxism theorised by Lenin and the Bolsheviks) had caused the ideal, socialism, to be realised by inspiring the revolution and radically transforming at least one part of the world. In this controversy, Gramsci adopts an original point of view: he denies that there are historical laws with an absolute character; he opposes the application of generic and very abstract schemas (which are derived from the interpretation of the normal development of economic and political activity in the Western world) to the history of Russia; he postulates that every historical phenomenon has an individual or particular character, and that, accordingly, they have to be studied in their own concreteness; he affirms that historical development is governed by the rhythm of freedom; and, ultimately, he foregrounds the role of psychology, of the will, of the subjectivity of individuals who act out of, and in the face of, a particular necessity. Gramsci thus refutes the opinion that the revolution under way must be considered a utopia.¹⁵

Revolution

When the Russian Revolution of October 1917 occurred, Gramsci had begun reading Marx 'out of intellectual interest'. He was neither a Marxologist, nor an academic Marxist, nor even did he have a thorough knowledge of Marx's works (as did, for example, his German contemporaries Rosa Luxemburg or Karl Kautsky, or Lenin in revolutionary Russia). Gramsci was a fledgling revolutionary socialist who was moved above all by the spirit of rebellion, and who had an awareness of the epochal shift signalled by the war then in progress. Gramsci had been a theatre critic, a chronicler of cultural traditions, and he had addressed himself to educational and cultural problems, but he had already developed his own thinking on all the important matters that he engaged with. He interpreted the events of the Russian October of 1917 as a

15 Gramsci, 'The Russian Utopia', in Gramsci 1977, pp. 48–55.

revolution against Marx's 'Capital', and, as early as the beginning of the 1920s, he sensed various of the contradictions that the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union would entail – contradictions which would subsequently turn out to be decisive in explaining the crisis of that system.

The Gramscian interpretation of the Russian Revolution as a rebellion which was as inevitable as it was a product of free will conflicts with the predictions made in the first volume of *Capital*, despite appearances to the contrary. In its time, this suggestive interpretation was atypical; ultimately, it proved correct. Gramsci was one of the first socialists to realise the dimensions of the political and social problem implied by a very new situation in the history of humanity: namely, the situation of a proletariat which formed a minority within Russian society as a whole, and which scarcely had food with which to feed itself, and yet which ended up being hegemonic in an ocean of peasants during a revolutionary process catalysed by the World War. In sum, this was the paradoxical situation of a social class which had nothing except – nominally – political power. This was a historic contradiction which perhaps only becomes truly comprehensible when analysed in terms similar to those used by Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht when talking of the Soviet Union of the time as a 'horned fish'.¹⁶

There is no need to force the interpretation of texts in order to point out the proximity of these arguments by Gramsci to the spirit and the methodological style of the lesson given by Marx towards the end of his life – indeed it was one of his last, and was precisely related to the possibility of revolution in Russia – to the editors of *Otetschestvennyi Zapiski*:

Thus events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historic surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.¹⁷

The objection might be made that Gramsci cannot have been aware of this letter by Marx. This is indeed correct. Gramsci did not learn the interesting lesson in terms of method which can be derived from the 'famous texts' through an

¹⁶ Benjamin 1986, p. 219: 'A few days later [at the beginning of August 1934], Brecht spoke of a "workers" monarchy', and I compared this creature with certain grotesque sorts of nature dredged up from the depths of the sea in the form of horned fish or other monsters'.

¹⁷ Marx and Engels 1975, p. 294.

engagement with them, but rather, once again, through individual reflection mediated by collective debate on a reality in whose process of transformation he felt immersed. This is indicative, among other things, of the advantages of maieutics, or what has been called Gramsci's Socratism. For insights such as the ones quoted above – whether in reference to method or in terms of its application – are not produced by a kind of sudden intellectual illumination, but precisely by an awareness on the part of the practical investigator of the decisive function of hypotheses (or 'the effort of fantasy', as Antonio Gramsci says himself in a passage) in any social-scientific investigation; likewise, such insights are generated by the determinate, particular character that such hypotheses assume in a field of activity such as politics, in which the theoretical construction of alternatives to be defended operates in an immediate way on the very life of human beings. In this approach, then, ethics is founded on politics, and the affirmation of freedom in the historical process occupies a primary position in the formulation of the hypotheses on which a scientifically grounded politics is based. For this reason, when considering revolutionary prospects, instead of speaking of ethical convictions and political responsibilities separately, Gramsci generally uses the expression 'ethico-political'. Likewise, in opposition to all political intrigue and pontification, Gramsci thus repeats countless times that *truth is revolutionary*, and that *truth is a revolutionary tactic*.

An interesting question, one worth posing today, in a psycho-sociological situation which has changed so much (when there are those who claim that communist history will not even leave a trace behind) is the following: what were the motives for which a man as sensitive and critical as Gramsci, who was aware of the internal contradictions of the system which arose from the October Revolution, not only rejected the Social-Democratic argument of the time (according to which the economic backwardness of Russia made the triumph of the socialist revolution there unviable), but, furthermore, upheld that revolution? Why, then, did he uphold the revolution against *Capital* (with all its contradictions), adducing the fact that it expressed the yearning for a *new order* which welled up among the subaltern classes, among the exploited wage-labourers allied with the impoverished peasants? Why did Gramsci, all things considered, prefer that 'horned fish' to the old capitalist order which was dominant in its various forms in other European countries and in the United States of America?

The question is not a gratuitous one. If I am posing it now, it is because a question of this type should have a singular connotation for young people, and because without a thorough and adequate answer to it, it could appear that, in effect, the history of the modern communist movement was nothing other

than a total mistake, which people (including Gramsci) fell into at the time out of sheer ignorance or dogmatism, or out of sheer evil. The fact that Gramsci (and many other men and women like Gramsci in the whole of Europe) were prepared to think through that contradiction, to live with it, and to remain communists is, in my opinion, a reason not to be taken in now by the trivialisations and simplifications of those books which offer a uniformly black picture of communism.

The Factory Councils: A Different Type of Democracy

Gramsci was impressed by what he considered to be the spontaneity of the revolutionary process in Russia, and, above all, he saw a new word being coined in that revolution. The word is *soviet* (council; *consiglio* in Italian). The soviet, or assembly-based council (of workers, soldiers or peasants) had been a creation of the first Russian revolution, the revolution of 1905. It is an institution or a form of organisation which is typical of a country with neither trade unions nor any trade-union tradition, like Russia at the time, and typical of a country in which almost all attempts to organise trade unions had been repressed by Tsarist absolutism and mostly had to be undertaken clandestinely or semi-clandestinely. The soviets reappeared with renewed strength during the revolutionary events of October – November 1917, when many workers and significant numbers of peasants and soldiers were desperate as a result of war, hunger and the ineffectiveness of those in power. Symptomatically, the revolutionary slogan *par excellence* of the time was ‘all power to the soviets!’ This was the Russian way of saying ‘all power to the workers, soldiers and peasants organised in assemblies!’

The revolutionaries of Western Europe (those in Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy) and North America (Daniel de Leon among others) interpreted the soviets as a new form of democracy, as one which was broader, more open, and more direct than the semi-representative liberal democracies which had existed up to that point. From 1919 on there were attempts to reproduce this form in Hungary, Germany (Bavaria and Berlin), Holland, Spain, and even in the USA. This also occurred, of course, in Italy, particularly in industrial Italy, in Turin, where Gramsci was living. The workers’ movement of Turin picked up the initiative between 1919 and 1920, occupied the factories (particularly FIAT) and organised itself into ‘factory councils’. The publication which Gramsci worked in at the time, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, was transformed into the official newspaper of the movement, distancing itself from the policies of the existing unions and the Italian Socialist Party.

Despite their diversity, the workers' councils of those years shared a series of defining characteristics which can be found in all of the different variants. These features were in essence the following:

1. The practice of direct democracy between workers, which was concretised in the direct election of workers' delegates or representatives in workshop and factory assemblies;
2. The affirmation of the principle of the constant revocability of mandates and delegations as a form of opposition to bureaucratisation and the emergence of personal fiefdoms;
3. The attempt to overcome the division existing between unionised and non-unionised workers, as well as between the different levels and categories of production;
4. Consequently, the overcoming of workers' organisation by trades as an antiquated form of unionisation which did not correspond to the level of development and organisation of the productive forces in post-war capitalism;
5. The affirmation of the primacy of struggle in the factories, and, consequently, of the need for the leadership of the workers' struggle to be located inside the factories itself;
6. The attempt to demonstrate the possibility of workers' management of production in the factory, dispensing with capitalist owners of the means of production.¹⁸

When the factory councils were formed in Italy, Gramsci was 28 years old. He had already abandoned the idea of completing a doctoral thesis on the history of language, he was living very modestly from journalism, and he was deeply engaged in cultural politics within the Italian Socialist Party. For him, the experience of the factory councils in Turin was the beginning of his exclusive dedication to revolutionary politics. He collaborated directly with the workers who were occupying the factories, and he became the principal theoretician of the Turin factory councils. However, Gramsci was not properly speaking a

18 Gramsci 1987b. Gramsci progressively establishes the defining characteristics of the factory councils in polemics with existing trade unionism in the following articles in *L'Ordine Nuovo*: 'To the Workshop Delegates of the Fiat Centro and Brevetti Plants' (13 September 1919); 'Unions and Councils' (8 November 1919); 'The Instruments of Labour' (14 February 1920); 'The Factory Council' (5 June 1920); 'Unions and Councils' (12 June 1920); 'The Turin Factory Councils Movement' (July 1920) in Gramsci 1977, pp. 94–7; pp. 98–102; pp. 162–6; pp. 260–4; pp. 265–8; and pp. 310–20 respectively.

professional politician like other socialist leaders, nor was he a trade-union leader; instead he was a cultured journalist (for the period) with a university education, who made the cause of the vanguard of the proletariat his own.

On the origin of the Turin factory councils, it is best to let Gramsci speak for himself:

Small committees of workers were already in existence inside the Turin factories [before 1919]: they were recognized by the capitalists and some of them had already launched a campaign against the bureaucracy, reformist spirit and constitutional tendencies of the unions. But for the most part these committees were nothing more than creatures of the unions. The lists of candidates for the committees (the Internal Commissions) were drawn up by the trade-union hierarchies, who showed a preference for workers of opportunist tendency; workers who would give no trouble to the bosses and who would stifle any mass action before it could start. What the followers of *L'Ordine Nuovo* emphasized most in their propaganda was the transformation of the Internal Commissions. They stressed that the lists of candidates should be drawn up by the working masses themselves and not by the upper echelons of the trade-union bureaucracy. The tasks they assigned to the Factory Councils were control over production, the arming and military preparation of the masses, and their political and technical preparation.¹⁹

Thus the criticism and rejection of the reformist orientation of the trade unions is once again at the origins of the workers' councils; in this case, it is combined with the utilisation in a creative sense of previous, ambiguous organisational forms. However, Gramsci's theorisation in this regard is not limited to critically interrogating the reformist or pseudo-revolutionary tendencies which were dominant in the trade unions of the time; instead, it penetrates to the bottom of the problem of the trade union as an institution. The substance of this theorisation can be summarised as follows.

Trade unions – argues Gramsci – emerged historically as a direct consequence of capitalism, i.e. as a result of the fact that workers need to sell their labour power at the best possible price; as such, they are institutions which are intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production itself, instruments for workers' contractual negotiations which allow the latter to attain better living standards, but which, owing to their very competitive nature and the objectives which they pursue, do not contain within themselves anything which would point towards a new society, towards a communist society. Consequently, the

19 'The Turin Factory Councils Movement' (July 1920) in Gramsci 1977, p. 316.

trade union 'can offer expert bureaucrats and trained technicians in industrial questions of a general nature to the proletariat, but it cannot from the basis of proletarian power'; it cannot be an instrument for the radical renewal of society.

The result of these modifications is the clarity with which the contrast emerges between unionised workers – those affiliated to unions – and non-unionised ones, who nonetheless share the same problematic and the same struggle. From this point of view, the new task is to investigate the organisation of the factory as an instrument of production, for here, in the figure of the worker as producer, as creator and not simply as wage labourer, is to be found the germ of the future state or new democracy.

However, the prefiguration of the new state in the kind of workers' democracy which is materialised in the factory councils cannot neglect the rest of the social structure. This means that, within the factory itself, workers will have to rely on the collaboration of other categories of employees, which, although less numerous at the time, 'are no less indispensable for all that', as Gramsci himself points out: these are the technicians of production and administration, the intellectual workers. Gramsci's theory of the collaboration of technicians in the workers' control of production and in the construction of the new state is based on his precise identification of the changes which had occurred in the relations between the various elements of this category and the industrial entrepreneur. In identifying these changes, he highlights with great precision and lucidity for the moment in which he was writing (1920) a phenomenon which, only decades later, has come to be recognised as essential: 'the technician too is reduced to the status of a producer, linked to the capitalist via the naked and savage relationship of exploited to exploiter. His mentality loses its petit-bourgeois encrustations and becomes proletarian, becomes revolutionary'.

It is true that this last identification (the mentality of the technician *becomes proletarian, becomes revolutionary*) exemplifies the idealist, and also, in this case, mechanistic, residue in the Gramscian theory of the councils, which is based, perhaps excessively, in productivism. However, as on so many other occasions, Gramsci returns to the theme not long after he writes these lines, reconsiders, and adds the substantive detail that industrial entrepreneurs *artificially* provoke or attempt to provoke competition between workers and technicians; this fact enables him to conclude with all the more justification that the systems of labour *tend* to ally these agents of production and *impel* them to unite politically.²⁰

20 'The Instruments of Labour' (14 February 1920), in Gramsci 1977, p. 164.

Outside the factory, the workers' committees would be complemented by neighbourhood committees representing other categories of workers and by equivalent peasants' organisations, thus articulating the composite whole of a system of proletarian democracy which would constitute the embryo of the future system of political soviets. The basis of such a system is the assembly form and its regulative principle is that representation and delegation must directly emanate from the masses and be linked to them by imperative mandate.

Between Libertarianism and Leninism

One of the interesting consequences of the experience of the factory councils in the city of Turin between 1919 and 1920 was that the practice of assembly-form democracy, and the aspiration to extend this type of democracy to all of the institutions of civil society, allowed links which had been broken since the times of the First International to be reformed between the two great traditions of the European workers' movement: Marxist socialism and anarchism. Although a minority, there were also anarchists in the editorial team of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, and Gramsci's dialogue with them enabled him to shape his point of view on the libertarian ideal.

In the debate with the anarchists about the revolutionary prospects and the destiny of the factory councils, Gramsci does not accept that socialism has to be considered the adversary of anarchism on principle, given that 'two ideas which are contradictory stand in an adversarial relation to each other, but not two ideas which are diverse'. He thinks, on the contrary, that working together is absolutely indispensable for the realisation of the revolution in Italy. He attempts to forge links precisely through the common critique of demagoguery in the face of the harangues of that anarchist tendency which accused the communists of doing 'politics' without realising that their own activity in the councils was simply another form of doing politics, another way of understanding political activity.

What exasperates Gramsci in this controversy is not the critique of institutionalised politics, which, obviously, he shares, but rather the professed disdain for all politics in the name of disorder as a positive value. For, in his opinion, abstract, ahistorical verbal declarations against all order and in favour of 'disorder' merely extend and give new life to the liberal vision of the bourgeoisie: 'The bourgeois was anarchist before his class won political power, the bourgeois continues to be an anarchist after the bourgeois revolution, because the laws of his State are not a constraint upon him... And the bourgeois will become

anarchist again after the proletarian revolution: . . . He will become aware that the State is synonymous with constraint, and he will struggle against it'.

In Gramsci's aversion to these harangues which substitute stridency for analysis, and which rail against reality without understanding it, lies the basis of a distinction which recurs through all of the articles containing his polemics with the anarchists: 'Is it possible to reach a settlement in this polemical dispute between communists and anarchists? It is possible – but only in the case of anarchist groups made up of class-conscious workers. There is no hope of any settlement in the case of anarchist groups made up of intellectuals, of professional ideologues'.²¹ On this basis, then, Gramsci makes a distinction between anarchism and libertarianism according to which, in creating history, when they act autonomously and consciously, all workers are libertarian. This is the context in which Gramsci's statements to the effect that the Turin factory councils were *a libertarian creation* of the working class, and the communists were the true libertarians, have to be understood.

In these years, the political project behind Gramsci's theorisation of the factory councils was inspired above all (although not exclusively) by Lenin's writings. Stated more precisely: it was inspired by a particular reading of some of the writings of Lenin, the theorist of revolution, as opposed to Lenin, the man of state. Gramsci accepted without question an idealised vision of the relation between soviet, party and state in the Russia of 'war communism', after the Revolution. In *L'Ordine Nuovo*, he tended to extrapolate some of the characteristics of the Turin factory councils to the institutionalised soviets in Russia, and to transplant the idealisation of the Russian soviet to the Italian experience at the same time. It was for this reason that Gramsci, having identified the psychosocial motives for the rise of Fascism, experienced the aftermath of defeat in 1921, after the council movement had been left isolated in Turin, as a state of emergency. Controversy raged as to the causes of defeat; the split in socialist ranks at Livorno led to the formation of the Communist Party of Italy. Furthermore, this is also the reason why, when Gramsci travelled to Moscow the following year, such an impression was made on him by the vision of things of Lenin, the man of the state, who was by now an old man, and one who was ill and self-critical.

In an essay which, still today, can certainly be considered an excellent starting-point for an insight into the process of maturation of the political ideas of Gramsci, Ernesto Ragionieri indicates the decisive influence which the sessions of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (held in Moscow between November and December 1922) had on Gramsci – in particular the

21 'Address to the Anarchists' (3–10 April 1920), in Gramsci 1977, p. 187.

report on the 'five years of revolution in Russia and the perspectives of the world revolution', presented by Lenin.²² In that speech, which must be considered one of the elements of his self-critical political testament, Lenin's principal preoccupation was the nature of the relations between the Russian Revolution and revolution in the West, a preoccupation which was determined in that moment by the awareness that he had been overly optimistic in the immediately preceding years about the consolidation of the institutions of the Soviet state: 'In 1917, after we seized power, the government officials sabotaged us. This frightened us very much and we pleaded, "Please come back." They all came back, but that was our misfortune. We now have a vast army of government employees, but lack sufficiently educated forces to exercise real control over them.'²³

This in itself, with its acute recognition of reality, must have caused a man like Gramsci to reflect, given that he was so attentive to the Russian experience, and had attached so much importance in previous years to the autonomy and the spontaneous character of the soviets and the *consigli*. However, Lenin's insistence on criticising the error of the Russification of the communist parties of the West since the Third Congress of the International, held the previous year, certainly made an even bigger impression on him. Indeed, the whole last part of Lenin's report was dedicated to this question. In this part of the report, the ageing Lenin reiterates the idea that an organic structure which was super-saturated with Russian spirit had been transplanted to the Western parties, and that it had been done, furthermore, through a resolution which was so Russian in form and spirit, so influenced by the Russian experience, that almost no foreigners had been able to read it, and even if they could have done so, they would not have understood it. 'I have the impression', Lenin states here, 'that we made a big mistake with this resolution, namely, that we blocked our own road to further success'. He follows this with a sober call for everyone, Russians and foreigners alike, to take advantage of the time not taken up by military or political activity in order to study, 'and to study from scratch'.²⁴

The official transcript of this report by Lenin records that there was laughter when he introduced the self-critical section by stating that 'nobody can judge or see [these foolish things] better than I'. By contrast, Gramsci took the matter very seriously. In his later *Prison Notebooks*, there are various references to the importance which he attached to Lenin's self-critical report. One of these references occurs, significantly, under the heading 'The translatability of scientific

22 Ragionieri 1976, pp. 192 ff.

23 Lenin 1965, pp. 430–1.

24 Ibid.

and philosophical languages'.²⁵ Owing to its interest for the understanding of one of the origins of Gramsci's reflection on revolution in the west, I will pause here to focus on how the philologist and politician expounds the matter: 'In 1921, when dealing with organisational questions, Vilici [Lenin] wrote, and said (more or less) this: we have not managed to "translate" our language into the European languages'. In reality, the pure politician, who was by now a man of the state, did not say that, and, in fact, he even clarified that it was not a problem of translation: '[the resolution] has been excellently translated into all languages'.²⁶ However, Gramsci's suggestion goes further than this, because, with Lenin dead, and in the context of the controversies within the CPSU, he wanted to go beyond the merely political in this question of the various languages, the various national 'spirits' and how to translate between them, which is such a delicate matter for a movement which aspires to be international.²⁷

Politics as Praxis: Organisation and Reconnaissance of the Terrain

This idea of *starting again from scratch* is the Leninist watchword which Antonio Gramsci appears to have adopted during his stay in Moscow, Vienna, and then in Rome, during the years of reconstruction of the Communist Party of Italy, up to his arrest in 1926. For Gramsci, these were four years of the most intense political activity within the leadership of his party and in the Communist International. Chronologically, the first lesson that Gramsci appears to have learned during his stay in Moscow (1922–3) is the decisive importance of the organisational apparatus in any attempt to have a bearing on the development of socio-political events, thus overcoming his previous doubts in this regard. For this reason, he writes to his former comrades of *L'Ordine Nuovo* to call their attention to the need to avoid repeating the error of 1919–20. Precisely because the group had been left politically isolated in that previous moment as a result of the repulsion that it had felt at the idea of having to form a faction, now, in 1923, the task at hand was to 'form a core of comrades within the Party who

25 Gramsci, 1975, p. 1468 [Q.11, §46].

26 Lenin 1965, *loc. cit.*

27 The question of languages [*lenguas*] (as a politico-cultural problem) and that of the translatability of linguistic forms [*lenguajes*] are fundamental for the nationalisation of the internationalist strategy that Gramsci advocates in the *Prison Notebooks*. I develop this point in the chapter on 'Language and Politics in Gramsci' in this volume.

have maximum ideological homogeneity and who are capable of bringing a superior unity of leadership to bear on practical action'.²⁸

This was one of the first steps to be taken in Gramsci's opinion; but, at the same time, it was necessary to eradicate the conception of the other nucleus of communists that had become dominant within the party after the Livorno congress, i.e. to overcome the 'other error, which is even more important, which consists in considering the problem of organisation abstractly, as if it were only a question of creating an apparatus of loyal and orthodox functionaries', given that – Gramsci thinks – the existence of such an apparatus cannot determine the revolution, for the latter does not depend solely on the organisational apparatus of the party.²⁹ For this reason, because Gramsci knows that the apparatus is a means and not an end in itself, and that nor is it the only determining factor, he is prompted to ask himself what the principal causes of the defeat of the Italian working class were, and why Fascism is in the ascendant. Once the reasons for the defeat have been elucidated, the attempt can be made to find the theoretical, strategic and tactical instruments in order to reorient the situation in a revolutionary direction once again.

This was an arduous task, then. Gramsci was conscious of this when, towards the end of 1923, he sent an article to the newspaper of the communist youth of Milan symptomatically entitled 'What Is to Be Done?', with the aim of influencing the polemical debates which were beginning to be developed in Italy at that time over the causes of the workers' defeat in 1920. This was an arduous task, because the question of where to begin always seemed to lead back to a prior starting point. It is true that the cause of the defeat was the inexistence of a revolutionary party, argues Gramsci, but what was the reason that such a party still did not exist in 1919–20? In attempting to think seriously and self-critically about the errors of the recent past, Gramsci once again expresses himself in rigorous terms, just as he had done in 1919, when reflecting upon the origin of *L'Ordine Nuovo*: he now argues that he and his comrades have to start by asking themselves 'who we were, what we wanted, where we wished to go'. However, even before answering these questions, the criteria, 'the principles, the ideological basis for our very [self-]criticism' have to be established.

Gramsci's line of argument on this occasion is very explicit and anticipates some of the questions which would subsequently be motives for profound reflection during his years in prison. Gramsci is of the opinion that the principal weakness of the Italian workers' parties was their lack of knowledge of the situation in which they had to operate; there was a lack of literature study-

28 Letter to Togliatti, 18 May 1923, in Gramsci 1992a, pp. 118–19.

29 Letter, 9 February 1924, in Gramsci 1992a, pp. 223–37.

ing the Italian socio-economic structure, the evolution of the most important political parties, their class connections, their significance; and not only was there an ignorance of the Italian situation, but – what is worse – there were not even adequate instruments to enable such knowledge to be gained. Given the lack of an adequate social science, there was not the capacity to analyse the concrete situation; it was impossible to anticipate events and establish hypotheses about future developments – in a word: to trace the lines of action which would be capable of having a bearing on reality with certain probabilities of success.³⁰

‘We are completely ignorant, [...] we are without orientation’, Gramsci states to his comrades. The absence of social analysis – of a social analysis which would have been needed to explain facts as relevant as the significance of syndicalism in Italy, its success among agricultural workers, the spatial coincidence of republicanism and anarchism, the phenomenon whereby many syndicalist elements went over to nationalism and then to the ranks of the Fascists – was, in his opinion, the reason why the Italian workers’ parties did not have an ‘ideology’ of their own to disseminate among the people. For all these reasons, Gramsci responds to the questions of what is to be done, and where to begin, with words which echo Lenin’s programme of late 1922: there is a need to study the problems of the working class, ‘to meet, buy books, organize lessons and discussions [on Marxism], form solid criteria for research and study, and criticize the past – in order to be stronger in the future and win’.³¹

Such is, for Gramsci, the beginning of the beginning. At the same time as he dedicated himself to organisational questions and prioritised them, he also progressively translated Lenin’s recommendation into a programme of studies in which some of the central themes of his reflections in *Prison Notebooks* are already apparent. His principal preoccupation was to dispel the facile illusions of young communists and to open the way for the overcoming of the prevailing pessimism and disorganisation among the working class of Fascist Italy.³² It is in this framework that Gramsci extends, and goes beyond, the first self-criticism of Leninism. He does so by intervening in two spheres almost

30 ‘What Is to Be Done?’, letter published by the newspaper *Voce della gioventù*, 1 November 1923, in Gramsci 1978, pp. 169–72.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

32 On Gramsci’s preoccupation with combating the pessimism existing among comrades and friends, see also the letter he sent from Vienna to Togliatti, Scoccimarro and Leonetti, 21 March 1924, in Gramsci 1992a, p. 282 ff., as well as his article entitled ‘Contro il pessimismo’, in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 15 March 1924 translated as ‘Against Pessimism’, in Gramsci 1978, pp. 213–17.

simultaneously. The first is the analysis of the new situation which had begun to emerge in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death in 1924. The second is the reconnaissance of the terrain in Fascist Italy. These two converge in 1926.

In both these matters, Gramsci demonstrated that he had his own thinking, both as a man active in politics, and as a political leader. His reflections on the first crisis in the leadership of the CPSU, which were met with incomprehension by nearly everyone when he voiced them, would open the way to the rectification of the excesses of Russification in the International. This was the basis for the emergence of the enlightened common sense that would provide the foundation for the theorisation of national paths to socialism.³³ On the other hand, Gramsci's (unfinished) reflection on the Southern question in Italy, whose core was the analysis of the mediating role of intellectuals, opened the way for a configuration of a new socio-historical bloc against Fascism. It can be said that in both cases, Gramsci's reflections served to dignify communist political practice in the face of the forms of economism, sociology or mechanicism which were dominant at the time. When these interventions are compared with the writings of his contemporaries, what is most striking is the balance with which Gramsci moves between history and the present, both in evaluating the consequences of the crisis in the Soviet leadership and in analysing the Italian Southern question.

All of Gramsci's political activity from 1924 until his arrest in November 1926 was marked by the attempt to resolve organisational problems and by the controversy being played out both in the Communist Party of Italy and in the International (and between both institutions) around the strategy to be followed after the recognition of the defeat of the revolution in Germany and the consolidation of Fascism in Italy. This was the epoch of the great debate between the idea of 'socialism in one country' and the idea of the 'permanent revolution'; a debate which, as is well known, ended up in great drama.

In those years, which he spent between Vienna and Rome, Gramsci was no longer a journalist or a political theorist; he was a communist leader with responsibilities, who had to take decisions, but at the same time he was a man in love who, in the absence of the woman he loved, declared that he was experiencing 'the desert of a life dedicated exclusively to politics'. In questions of organisation, he essentially adhered to the Leninism which was characteristic of the leaderships of the communist parties of the time, and which was called

33 *Senso comune* is the title which Gramsci proposed in 1923 for a newsletter. It was inspired by the labour movement publication *Common Sense*. In making the proposal, he states, significantly, that 'common sense could be not only the title of the bulletin, but also ... a programme' (Gramsci 1992a, pp. 115–16).

'democratic centralism'. It was something that went unquestioned in the circles in which Gramsci was working. In any case, he believed that Bolshevisation was necessary in order to maintain a revolutionary attitude in a phase characterised by 'the relative stabilisation of capitalism'. The originality of his political praxis during those years is not to be found here, but in the way that he intervened in the other question, in the controversy on political strategy. In this, what is unique about Gramsci is that he advocated and sought to bring about the union of national autonomy and internationalism.

Amid the controversy of those years, Gramsci's position cannot be assimilated to that of any other communist political leader of the time, either in the Russian party or in the International. Properly speaking, he was neither a Stalinist, nor a Trotskyist, nor a Bukharinite. He was too secular, too 'Protestant' to be any of those things. Many misconceptions about Gramsci have arisen from his 'secular' inclinations.

On reading his correspondence with the other members of the leading group of the Communist Party of Italy from those years, what is most striking is the lucidity, veracity and prudence with which Gramsci managed to manoeuvre in a situation of bitter oppositions which was later to escalate into assassinations. In order to grasp this uniqueness of his, abstraction must certainly be made from some of the ritualised formulae of the moment. Before issuing judgements or taking initiatives, Gramsci always asked for more information on every single one of the matters that he dealt with, and made clear distinctions as to what was being spoken about at every moment.

For this reason, Gramsci was able to accept Trotsky's argument (against Stalin) on the historical development of the Russian Revolution, and Bukharin's point of view (against Trotsky) on the New Economic Policy in the Soviet Union; he defended Stalin from the accusation of nationalism which the communist Left aimed at the latter, and he disagreed with Togliatti (whose attitude he considered bureaucratic) over the best form of intervention in the Soviet controversy. He criticised the administrative methods that the Stalinist majority was using to conduct the political struggle within the Russian party, and he distanced himself both from the majority as well as from the opposition minorities, as he considered that both groups subordinated the interests of the international proletariat to the Russian question.³⁴ He rejected both the Trotskyist concretisation of the idea of 'permanent revolution' for Western Europe, as well

34 See the letter of 14 October 1926 in the name of the political bureau of the PCd'I ('The violent passion of the Russian question has made you lose sight of the international aspects of the Russian question itself') and that of 26 October 1926 (to Palmiro Togliatti); both in Gramsci 1992a, pp. 455–79.

as the Stalinist instrumentalisation of the idea of 'socialism in one country'. Gramsci put the need for unity above these divergences, and he argued that what was most important in those circumstances, apart from the unity of the Russian core, was to analyse the differences between East and West and to act accordingly.

It is here that the Gramscian strategy in relation to revolution in the West begins to emerge – a strategy that would later be developed in the *Prison Notebooks*. After the failure of the revolution in Germany, Gramsci had been thinking about how to translate the internationalist tactic of the united front 'into Italian historical language'. For him, such a translation would mean displacing the process of the formation of communist parties from the international terrain to the national, and, as such, it would then imply a significant change in the understanding of internationalism. Gramsci understood intuitively that, in the new conditions, the revolutionary movement could not be directed from one central locus and from above, and that there was, instead, a need to fuse national autonomy and internationalism.

On the other hand, the need for the reconnaissance of the national terrain was given, in his opinion, by the differences existing between the Russian experiment and the modalities of the proletarian revolution in Western Europe, as well as by the presence of Fascism in Italy. The principal differentiating factor was, for Gramsci, the existence in Western Europe of certain *political and organisational reserves* which the ruling class did not have at its disposal in Russia. This was the reason why in that part of Europe, not even the most serious economic crises had had any immediate repercussions to the benefit of the subaltern classes on a political level. In the West, there is always a time lag in politics – indeed, a time lag relative to the economy. In this context, the translation of the idea of a workers' and peasants' government would mean, in the case of Italy, inserting the Southern question and that of the Vatican into the programme of the party. This is how the Southern question is transformed into a national question for Gramsci.³⁵

Unfortunately, Gramsci was arrested by the Fascist police when he was beginning to transform this reflection into a concrete alternative political reality. Thus we cannot know how his project would have been realised in the sphere of political praxis, nor if Gramsci would have succeeded in overcoming Togliatti's reservations in terms of the former's ideas vis-à-vis the relationship

35 For the reconstruction of the political thought of Gramsci during these years, see Paggi 1984; and Vacca 1999, which reproduces the correspondence between the leaders of the PCd'I and a total of 56 documents which were kept in the archives of the Comintern until 1990.

with the leading group of the CPSU, nor what Gramsci's fate would have been, if he had not been in prison when the Stalinist repression became acute in the USSR. There has been a lot of speculation about all this, but I shall not dwell on this here. What Gramsci was able to do in the following years, from prison, was to extend his reflections and analysis on these matters – i.e., on the implications of the Southern question and on the fusion of national and international revolutionary strategy – that he had begun between 1924 and 1926.³⁶

Politics as the Ethics of the Collective

In order to understand the Gramscian conception of politics as the ethics of the collective, it is necessary to focus on three aspects. The first and principal one is the (reasoned) passion with which Gramsci always defended truthfulness in politics. The second aspect is the comparison that he gradually established, in the notes to the *Prison Notebooks*, between the philosophy of praxis and Machiavellianism. The third is his (tentative) dialogue with the Kant of the categorical imperative in the context of an interesting discussion on the latter's lack of realism and on ethical relativism.

As a young man, Gramsci had already written, with much moral fervour, that the truth should always be respected, independently of the consequences that such respect might entail. The search for truth and the aspiration to truthfulness in political affairs are congruent with the convictions that the politically engaged individual explicitly avows, and these must harbour within their logic the justification for the actions that the individual with convictions deems necessary to undertake. By contrast, lies and falsification – declares the young Gramsci – only serve to construct castles in the sky that other lies and falsifications will bring crashing down.³⁷ Gramsci later adopted Lassalle's maxim, according to which truth is always revolutionary. For the former, 'to tell the truth and to reach the truth together' was the moral substance of the communist programme in the era of *L'Ordine Nuovo*. In the notebooks and the letters that he wrote while in prison, Gramsci reiterates that to tell the truth is intrinsic to any authentic politics and to the tactics of any revolutionary politics. In his correspondence, the exaltation of truthfulness – in opposition not only to explicit lies or deceit, but also to false pity and uncomprehending

36 I deal with how this reflection was extended in 'The Plan, Structure and Themes of the *Prison Notebooks*' in this volume.

37 'Per la verità' [1916], in Gramsci 1980, p. 5. Among Gramsci scholars, the best treatment of this point has been that by Santucci 2001, pp. 65–76.

compassion – was the red thread around which Gramsci attempted to organise a healthy personal relationship and a good life in the public sphere. It might be said that it is Gramsci's truthfulness, his passion for seeking out and telling the truth, that is the most moving aspect of his prison correspondence, probably because the attentive reader will immediately comprehend that it is here, in this passion which he experienced in such lamentable conditions, that one of the causes of his tragedy is to be found.

However, how does the exaltation of truthfulness, this insistence on the need to tell the truth in politics, square with, and complement, the attraction that Gramsci felt for Machiavelli? Is not Machiavelli the father of the 'double truth' in politics, the representative *par excellence* of a conception of politics in which telling the truth has no place because it would be tantamount to ingenuousness?

Gramsci firmly defended Machiavelli's principal lesson: the analytical distinction of different spheres – ethics and politics – with the consequent affirmation of *the autonomy of the political domain*.³⁸ This distinction implies that the activity of politically engaged individuals is to be judged on the aptitude or otherwise of their proposals and projects in public life. It should be a judgement made with relative independence from the judgement that we might pronounce as to the good or bad faith of these individuals; this would be a moral judgement. This distinction is a fundamental one for the political philosopher and for the lay form of doing politics, although it still encounters significant resistance in really existing democracies. The methodological affirmation of the autonomy of the political sphere implies that politically engaged individuals cannot be judged first and foremost on what they do or fail to do in their private lives, but, rather, by taking into account whether they fulfil their public commitments or not, and to what extent. In this sphere, the judgement – Gramsci considers – is a political one, and, as such, what are to be judged are the coherence and the suitability of the means for specific ends. This does not mean that political coherence is opposed to honesty in principle, as distorters of Machiavelli and pseudo-Machiavellians would have it. The recognition of the fact that the judgement on this level is political goes hand in hand with the statement that the honesty of the individuals is precisely a necessary factor of political coherence.

In modern life, this confusion between the ethical plane and the political one has two consequences. The first, and most fundamental one, is the persistence of a very widespread conception (which Machiavelli called Christian hypocrisy), which tends to devalue politics as an activity in the name of a

38 Gramsci, 1971, pp. 133–6 [Q.13, §20].

universalist and absolutising morality, a morality which is solemnly espoused but not put into practice. The persistence of this tendency is reinforced, in the contemporary world, by the fact that there does indeed exist a broad layer of professional politicians (that which is now called 'the political class') in society who live in and from politics in bad faith, without ethical convictions, converting public activity and decisions into matters of private interest. This is the breeding ground for corruption. What is more, this leads to the vulgar identification of politics with lies, deceit and duplicity, that is, with false Machiavellianism. Gramsci rejects this very widespread identification and, in this context, he recalls an old Jewish joke: 'Where are you going?' Isaac asks Benjamin. 'To Cracow,' Benjamin replies. 'What a liar you are. You say that you're going to Cracow in order to lead me to believe that you are really going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you're going to Cracow. What need is there to lie, then?' From this, Gramsci deduces that, in terms of politics as praxis, it is possible to speak of a reserve (i.e. a classical prudence), but not of lies in the petty-minded sense; and secondly, that it is in fact necessary to tell the truth, in the sense of being truthful, in the context of a politics which is to present an alternative to political intrigue; in the context of a political activity which takes into account and prioritises peoples' feelings and beliefs.³⁹

There is still another important aspect to be considered in Gramsci's reflections; namely, that it is precisely the extension of this confusion of spheres among the subaltern classes of society which always accompanies and facilitates the generalisation and manipulation of the sentiment which political corruption generates in so-called public opinion, pushing it towards a generic negation and liquidation of politics as such. The oscillation between pursuing politics without ethical convictions and the moralist manipulation of public opinion against all politics is, for Gramsci, the ultimate consequence of primitivism, of the very elementary character of a culture which still does not make any clear distinction between ethical and political spheres. To put it another way: what has sometimes pretentiously been presented, and continues to present itself, as scepticism or cynicism in relation to certain behaviour in the public sphere is not in fact such – it is not in fact an effective critique of politics, but is rather a lack of political culture which is induced by those who wish to keep the subaltern classes on the margins of political participation.

Nor have the social-communist tradition, the philosophy of praxis, or historical materialism in any of its variants managed to steer clear of this confusion of spheres between ethics and politics. In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci denounces the existence of a dubious tendency within historical materialism

39 Gramsci 2011b, p. 17 [Q. 6, §19].

which, in its vulgarisation of the latter, connects with the worst traditions of Italian middlebrow culture and foments them. He alludes in this context to improvisation, the preoccupation with talent, fatalist apathy, the fantasies of dilettantism, the lack of intellectual discipline, and moral and intellectual irresponsibility.⁴⁰ This critique recalls the same psycho-sociological traits that Gramsci had excoriated, some years before, in his analysis of the socio-cultural origins of Fascism in Italy. In that context, Gramsci had in fact written that intellectual disorder leads to moral disorder, and that this was one of the factors in the rise of Fascism. In connection with this preoccupation, in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci affirms the need for an internal, severe and rigorous critique, without conventionalisms or diplomacy; indeed, such a critique needs to be a dual one: it must be levelled at prejudices and conventions, false duties and hypocritical obligations, but also at affected scepticism, absolute relativism and snobbish cynicism.

Gramsci embarks on the search for a balance between private and public ethics (or, rather, between ethics and politics as an ethics of the collective) through a critique of commonplace Machiavellianism and vulgar Marxism. In both cases, the degeneration of the original point of view, i.e., of Machiavelli and of Marx respectively, consists, as it were, in the confusion of political morality with private morality, and of politics with ethics.

For Gramsci, the great contribution of Machiavelli consists in having *analytically* distinguished politics from ethics. Not only that, but it also consists in having done so, at the origins of modernity, not only in elitist terms, for the benefit of the prince, *but rather in favour of the subaltern classes*. This is the basis of Machiavelli's republicanism. The question is: does this distinction presuppose a disdain for, or negation of, ethics, as is sometimes said? Gramsci's answer is that it does not. Such a distortion is the consequence of a dubious reading of Machiavelli which was promoted by the historical rivals of Machiavellianism, beginning with the Jesuits, who were 'in practice his best disciples'.⁴¹

The pejorative, vulgar, but partisan use of the word 'Machiavellianism' reduces politics to the imposition of *la raison d'état* to the detriment of any ethical principles. However, Machiavelli is not reducible to vulgar or invented 'Machiavellianism'. For Gramsci, Machiavelli is simultaneously a political scientist and a man of politics. As a scientist, he establishes an analytic distinction between morality and politics, precisely in order to confer an autonomy upon politics as a science, as rational reflection. This analytical distinction, made for methodological reasons, does not negate all morality. Machiavelli

40 Gramsci 2011b, vol. 3, p. 62 [Q. 6, §79].

41 Gramsci 1971, p. 391 [Q.16, §9].

himself, as a man of politics, cannot neglect the 'ought'. The complication of the matter is given by the question as to what kind of 'ought' this is, whether it is a mere arbitrary and abstract act, or a concrete volition; this is true for Machiavelli at the origins of modernity, as, by extension, for anyone purporting to reflect upon the 'New Prince' – i.e. upon politics, power and obligation in late modernity.⁴² When, in the one case as in the other, the 'ought' is contemplated as the concrete will, *what is being affirmed is the need for another morality*, a morality distinct from the dominant Christian-confessional, Roman Catholic or secularised one. The latter, as Machiavelli was able to discern, renders lay politics impossible, since, by restricting itself to announcing Paradise (in its multiple forms), it leads to disaster in this world. Thus, Machiavelli was able to establish a relation between ethics and politics that was closer to that of the ancients, for whom politics was also more fundamental than ethics, both as knowledge and as praxis. This dimension, which is obvious to any educated reader of the works of Aristotle, is neglected and obscured in the usual, vulgar version of Machiavellianism.

In the same way that the Machiavellian analytical distinction between ethics and politics (with the consequent denunciation of a concrete, historically specific ethics that does not allow the development of politics as a 'public ethics') ended up giving way to the vulgar version of Machiavellianism, so too the Marxian rejection of bourgeois double standards, false duties and hypocritical obligations (with the consequent proposal for a revolutionary politics, and for a lay public ethics) has been the subject of much confusion. This has given rise to, on the one hand, politicism, petty politics (which slips from the negation of the universality of values to an absolute ethical scepticism); and, on the other, politicisation of the old traditional values (in the context of the political party itself), with the effect that there is a tendency to situate one's political friends *beyond justice*. This last distortion is, for Gramsci, characteristic of sects and mafias, in which the particular (the friendship and brotherhood which are peculiar to the private sphere) is elevated to the universal, and no distinction is made any longer between the sphere of individual morality and that of political engagement, or between ethics and politics.⁴³

This part of Gramsci's reflection on ethics and politics is still extremely interesting and of much relevance today. This is so for various reasons. From the historiographical point of view, this is true on account of that which Gramsci's thought recovers from Machiavelli, and on account of its affirmation of the 'revolutionary' character of authentic 'Machiavellianism', in opposition to the

42 Gramsci 1971, pp. 171–3 [Q.13, §16].

43 Gramsci 2011b, vol. 3, pp. 62–3 [Q. 6, §79].

latter's partisan critics. From the point of view of political theory, Gramsci's reflections are of great interest and contemporary relevance because they contribute to the elevation of Machiavelli's principal discovery to enlightened common sense, which permits us to speak legitimately of a national-popular *political* culture befitting the times. From the point of view of the historical evolution of the various Marxisms, the interest and relevance of Gramsci's reflection is that it leads to a radical broadening of the Machiavellian concept of the relation between ethics and politics, to the idea of a 'Modern Prince', which is no longer a singular individual, but rather a collective organisation which must also be capable of distinguishing analytically between ethics and politics within itself.

However, this is not all. This part of Gramsci's reflection, which is based on the comparison between Machiavellianism and Marxism, enables a fruitful consideration of one of the great themes of contemporary public life: *the relationship between politics and crime*. It is well known that there is an attraction felt in moments of cultural crisis, or of the crisis of collective identity, or of the crisis of politics (and today there is once again talk of 'the death of politics') for the traditional 'communitarianism' of mafias and sects, or of closed organisations. This attraction is accompanied by the tendency, above all in cases of political corruption, to place one's own (one's political friends in the party) above justice; the demand is often reiterated that they should be treated in the public sphere as they would be treated within the family. This attraction and this tendency coincide in an atavistic moralism which denies jurisdiction to the justice of men when 'our own' are concerned, and a modern *Mafioso* sectarianism, which defers the judgement of the public wrongdoings of politicians to the partisan comparison of the private morality of individuals ('the morality of our own is beyond any doubt and above any decision taken by any tribunal', as is customarily said in such cases).

It is worth emphasising that it is in Marx's historical materialism (once divested of its vulgar interpretations) that Gramsci rediscovers the thread which leads him, in the context of his dialogue with both Machiavelli and Kant on the relation between ethics and politics, to affirm the superiority of the conception of the ancients on this score: the latter prioritised the virtues characteristic of the sphere of the *polis*, in short, political virtues. The human being is still a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. However, the modern 'primitive' is not always aware of this fact. Indeed, Machiavelli reminded him of it. Moreover, Gramsci's intention is to organise human beings so that they can carry out their own moral and intellectual reform. Thus, for Gramsci, the foundation of a higher morality, of morality *per se*, would consist in the Socratic

quest for critical knowledge and the overcoming of the ignorance and intellectual disorder which leads us to act wrongly.

For the Gramsci of the *Notebooks*, there is no place, however, for a single, absolute, homogenising and universal foundation for the ethical principle. Gramsci deals with this matter on several occasions by critically engaging with Kant's categorical imperative. In 1932–3, he rejected the Kantian categorical imperative with a strong argument against enlightened universalist cosmopolitanism. This argument states that Kant's maxim, which Gramsci reads as a *desideratum*, according to which one's own conduct should be transformed into a norm for all individuals in similar conditions, is unrealistic and impracticable, because it presupposes a single culture, a single religion and a worldwide conformism, when in reality there are not similar conditions for all, nor can there be in a divided world.⁴⁴ The objection goes further than the one expressed by the great poet Schiller, already in Kant's time, in his satirical poem entitled *Scruples of Conscience*. Here Schiller writes with irony: 'Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with inclination / And thus I am frequently nagged by my lack of virtue'.⁴⁵

According to Gramsci's critique, the Kantian principle of the categorical imperative leads to an absolutisation or a generalisation of beliefs which are given historically. However, the attempt to provide an absolute foundation for morality is inadmissible; in order to establish the foundation for an ethics of freedom, it is necessary to have historical analysis as one's starting-point. In this regard, Marx furnishes a criterion: society does not set itself tasks if the conditions for their solution are not already in existence. Marx's historicism implies, then, the admission of a certain cultural relativism, and this in turn implies the critical recognition of the existence of distinct moral principles in different cultural contexts. It might be said, on this basis, that there is no universal Ethics; there are only various ethics linked to different histories, traditions and cultures.

From this perspective, two possibilities would remain open: either to seek to outline a minimal ethics, a minimal moral philosophy, based in dialogue, communication, consensus and the reduction of the different moral principles to a liberal lowest common denominator, or to propose anew 'the heresy of liberalism' which is Marxism, by contemplating the Kantian moral ideal as a limit idea, a regulative idea which will only cease to be utopian in a different society, in the regulated society. Gramsci follows the second path.

44 Gramsci 1971, pp. 373–4 and pp. 345–6 [Q. 11, §§58–59].

45 Cited in Timmermann 2007, p. 152 (translation by J. Timmermann).

When, some months later, Gramsci re-engages with the Kantian categorical imperative, in the context of a discussion on what is natural, against nature, artificial, etc., he concludes the passage by asking himself explicitly what is the temporal duration of various ethics, and what are the criteria to know if a particular moral conduct is the most appropriate for a specific state of development of the productive forces. The context in which Gramsci poses this question⁴⁶ indicates that his principal preoccupation is precisely the criterion of the temporal validity of historical materialism on the plane of ethics. Who decides on the validity of historically conditioned moral behaviours? Gramsci successively rejects the notions that such a question can be answered by adducing natural morality, artifice or convention. For him there is no lay pope, nor any *ad hoc* competent authority. The only thing which is valid in this respect is to recognise the very clash of discordant opinions. This also forms part of the struggle for cultural hegemony.

Now, however, for Gramsci, neither the affirmation of the Machiavellian analytic distinction between ethics and politics, nor the rejection of the existence of a universal ethical principle in the Kantian sense, nor the critique carried out by Marx of the double standards characteristic of bourgeois culture, implies the defence of a politics which is alien to ethics or the postulation of an absolute ethical relativism of the kind in which 'anything goes, according to circumstance'. Gramsci states that there can be no permanent political activity which is not sustained by specific ethical principles which are shared by the individual members of the corresponding association. These are the ethical principles which give an internal compactness and homogeneity in order to achieve the proposed end. Here, then, we see the distinction between mafia (or sect) and party once again.

That which distinguishes a mafia or a sect from the 'collective intellectual', from the 'Modern Prince' or from the new type of party, is precisely their distinct conceptions of universal principles and ends. While, for the mafia, the association is an end in itself, and ethics and politics are confused within it (because the particular interest is elevated to the status of a universal one), the political party, understood as a Modern Prince, a vanguard or a collective intellectual, does not posit itself as something definitive, but rather as something which tends to extend itself to the whole social grouping: *its universalism is tendential*. In the party, politics is conceived of as a process that will culminate in morality – that is, as a process tending to culminate in a form of coexistence in which politics and therefore morality will be both overcome. In the meantime, it is criticism and the battle of ideas that determines the best

46 Gramsci 1975, pp. 1876–8 [Q.16, §12].

form of moral behaviour of the people involved. There is no lay communion of the saints. In short, when Gramsci advocates a politics which is an ethics of the collective, this does not merely imply the restoration of the noble sense of the word 'politics' *contra* moralism or any form of *mafioso* activity. It also consists in the *critique of the prevailing politics*, the critique of 'petty politics', the critique of political intrigue.

What should be concluded from the analysis of these fragments by Gramsci on the relation between ethics and politics?

If the emphasis is placed on the comparison with the Kantian moral imperative, then it should be recognised that Gramsci's historicism represents a realistic corrective to moral idealism and ultimately advances a new socio-historical formulation that accords primacy to politics over ethics. The new ethico-political imperative can be stated as follows: 'The ethics of the collective intellectual must be conceived of as being capable of being transformed into a norm for the conduct of all of humanity through the tendentially universal character which historically specific relations confer upon it'. It is not a question of the negation of universality, but of the reaffirmation of *the tendentially possible universality* in a given, concrete historical context. This indicates that the emphasis, in relation to Kant's categorical imperative, has once again been displaced from the individual to the collectivity, to the association.

Essentially, this idea of Gramsci's is an ancient, classical conception of the relation between ethics and politics; it is the extension of the Greek conception, more precisely the Aristotelian one. However, it is also the conception of the relation between ethics and politics that emerges at the origins of critical, republican modernity. It is the extension of the Machiavellian conception in the most authentic sense. It is a conception that has as its starting point the radical critique of the double standards characteristic of bourgeois society, with an explicit consideration of the subaltern classes. It is a conception of the relation between ethics and politics that affords primacy to the political because it considers the participation of the ethical individual in collective affairs, in the affairs of the city, of the *polis*, to be necessary and inevitable. Once the separation *de facto* between ethics and politics has been acknowledged, the individual aspires to a coherence, an integration of private and public virtue with the consideration that such a coherence can only be achieved in society, and, as such, politically.

The Plan, Structure, and Themes of the *Prison Notebooks*

First Impressions

The first encounter with Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks in Valentino Gerratana's critical edition can be disconcerting for the unsuspecting contemporary reader.¹ This is above all for reasons of a formal kind, such as the relatively fragmentary character of the texts, the reiteration of some reflections, and the variety of themes dealt with. On reviewing the titles of the notes and reflections contained in the notebooks, the reader might be reminded of a kind of *zibaldone* in the style of Giacomo Leopardi – i.e., a miscellany of various kinds of writings.²

Indeed, in the three volumes in which Gerratana published the prison notebooks, we find notes of greatly varying lengths alongside what can properly be considered essays and more elaborate studies which deal with a wide range of subjects. In the notebooks, there are entries consisting of the criticism of books read by the author, as well as reflections on problems of daily life, but also other series of notes of a theoretical character in which Gramsci progressively elaborates an original concept of ideology (which is not strictly Marxian); there are entries which deal with the history of intellectuals, and others, for example, which are dedicated to the law of value as it was formulated by the classical economists and by Marx; there are fairly detailed methodological reflections on the relations between science, the conception of the world, religion, philosophy and common sense, but also more specific considerations on the importance of folklore; there are notes on philology and literary criticism, and outlines of economic theory or political economy; there are drafts which we could include under the heading of political science or contemporary sociology, and others which are strictly paedagogical, or which deal with the theory of education.

At first glance, this vast range of subject matter can give an impression of dispersion or lack of focus. Indeed, given that the notes, outlines and almost monographic essays that are contained in the notebooks were the fruit of

¹ Gramsci 1975.

² Cf. Leopardi 1997.

studies carried out in prison, and were to a great extent conditioned by the precarious state of health of their author, such dispersion is understandable. Furthermore, it is well known that Gramsci was not a specialist in any of the particular sciences established according to academic divisions, but someone who carried out studies in philology at university, left his university career unfinished, and then dedicated all his energies for more than ten years to journalism, to political life and to organisation of the workers.

In spite of all this, however, we should not deceive ourselves on this score: the prison notebooks are not only the spontaneous result of necessity in adversity, nor is everything in them a mere dispersion or fragmentedness resulting from the dire conditions for study and from the fact that they were written in captivity. Nor do they have the labyrinthine character of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*. In Gramsci's decision to write the notebooks, there was a very deliberate work plan. Furthermore, although this plan could not be completely realised in practice due to circumstances beyond the control of Gramsci, its results still reveal a kind of red thread which ran through the prisoner's initial programme.

If we disregard for a moment the chronological ordering of the entries in the notebooks (i.e. the dates on which each of the notes were written or rewritten), these results can still be grouped thematically, as was done by the first editors of the prison notebooks, as follows: 1) On historical materialism and its comparison with the philosophy of Benedetto Croce; 2) On intellectuals and the organisation of culture; 3) On the *Risorgimento*; 4) On Machiavelli, politics and the modern state; 5) On literature and national life; 6) On the past and present.³

Pros and Cons of the Critical Editions of the Prison Notebooks

The publication of the notebooks according to the themes treated in them – in other words, by placing the emphasis on various of the essential matters which preoccupied Gramsci in prison for didactic reasons – obscures a dimension which is no less important for the comprehension of their content, namely the evolution and the rhythm of the thinking of their author, or the gradual turn of

3 These are the titles of the six volumes of the prison notebooks in the edition published by Giulio Einaudi, in Turin, between 1948 and 1951. This edition was promoted by Palmiro Togliatti, and it was undertaken under the direction of Felice Platone. The first thematic edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* is inseparable from the political and cultural vision of Palmiro Togliatti, that is to say, from the place that the latter attributed to Gramsci in the political and cultural history of the *Novecento*.

his intellectual preoccupations between 1929 and 1936. What is lost in such an edition, in short, is the tortuous process undertaken by Gramsci in composing something which was not properly speaking a book, nor a finished work, nor even a collection of monographic essays.

The importance of such a loss, and whether it might not be compensated by the ease of use of a thematic edition for didactic purposes, is open to debate.⁴ Moreover, this debate is a meaningful one – it is no trifling discussion, above all if those passages of the notebooks which, for various reasons, were excised by the first editors have been restored in thematic editions, as has usually been the case in recent times. The truth of the matter is that we do not know how Gramsci would have chosen to present his notebooks to his readers, had he been able to do so. We know what his intentions were when he wrote them, and we know the effort that he made to preserve them from fascist censorship. However, we also know, from other statements of his in relation to his own earlier writings, that he was in no way inclined to publish for the sake of publishing, and even less to publish compilations of his own writings when he considered that these had already served their purpose. We also know reliably, because Gramsci indicated as much on various occasions in writing his drafts, that some of the notes and reflections contained in the notebooks were materials of a *work in progress*, materials that Gramsci himself would surely not have submitted to the printer without serious revision.

For this reason, if Gramsci's wishes are to be respected, the decision as to the form in which the notebooks should be published is not such a simple one. The thematic criterion for the publication of the notebooks had – and surely still has – a justification: to make things easy for the average reader. This criterion, while open to challenge, cannot simply be rejected out of hand, once it is conceded that there is an interest in making available the work which Gramsci was not able to publish, but which was also structured thematically in his head (as can be seen both from his initial plan for the notebooks and from his final preoccupation with reordering his pre-1931 writings according to subject matter, in the process of which he partially reworked them following this order).

The historical-critical criterion, which was the one followed by Valentino Gerratana in his 1975 edition, has the advantage over the thematic criterion that it does justice to the rhythm of Gramsci's own thinking: it allows us to know what is actually contained in each of the notebooks, and, in passing, to form an idea of the temporal evolution of the author, that is, to understand

4 V. Gerratana discusses this in a very balanced way in Gerratana 1997, particularly in the first three essays of the book, whose contents are based on the experience Gerratana acquired during the preparation and production of the critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*.

Gramsci's form of working, his methodology in practice, his reservations and doubts, his iterations and his preferences, as well as, to a certain extent, the influence of circumstances on the writing process. All of these factors, given a historicist author such as Gramsci, constitute a substantial advantage if one is to avoid hagiographies (including the unintentional ones by the first editors).

Gerratana's edition, in three volumes, has the following structure: I) notebooks 1–5 (1929–32); II) notebooks 6–11 (1930–3); III) notebooks 12–29 (1932–5). Volume IV is reserved for the critical apparatus, and in it, apart from numerous notes explaining and contextualising Gramsci's reflections, the reader will find a detailed description of each and every one of the 29 prison notebooks. In justifying this option (which is customary practice in the publication of classical texts), Gerratana wrote: 'There was the desire to avoid anything external coming in between the reader and Gramsci's text'.⁵

The criterion followed by Gerratana in his excellent edition, on the other hand, has the disadvantage that it requires a greater effort of concentration by the reader, precisely because the historical-critical respect accorded to the material requires a plethora of editorial notes on Gramsci's reiterations and re-workings, and the inclusion of numerous cross-references, since, as is immediately evident, the second volume includes notes drafted before 1932, and the third volume includes notes from before 1933. These overlaps are due to the fact that the chronological ordering has a limitation: even though the starting date of each of the prison notebooks is known, it is very difficult to date every single one of Gramsci's notes and the exact moment at which he revised them with any precision.⁶

This difficulty cannot be adduced, of course, as an argument in favour of the thematic edition of the notebooks,⁷ but it has a certain importance when evaluating Gramsci's reflections directly relating to the political events of the time, or those in which there are oblique allusions, so to speak, to the controversies existing in the communist movement between 1928 and 1935. It should be taken into account that when Gramsci was arrested by Mussolini's police, in 1926, he was the first secretary of the Communist Party of Italy, and that, although political tactics and strategy are not, for obvious reasons, the

5 Gerratana 1997, p. 54.

6 Gerratana 1997, p. 8: 'A reconstruction of the order of the texts which exclusively and rigorously followed a chronological criterion would not be possible. For that it would be necessary, among other things, to dismember each one of the notebooks and to destroy arbitrarily not only their material individuality, but also the logical order followed by Gramsci'.

7 On this point I concur with the substance of the argument in G. Liguori, 'Le edizioni dei *Quaderni* di Gramsci tra filologia e politica', in Baratta and Liguori (eds.) 1999, pp. 217–32.

principal theme of the prison notebooks, their author maintained his political passion until almost the end of his life. This political passion is ever present, at least as a backdrop, in the elaboration of many of the notes that Gramsci wrote in prison.

It can be said, in any case, that the disadvantage outlined above has grown with the passage of time, for reasons which of course are extraneous to the excellence of the philological work of Gerratana. Furthermore, this has given rise in recent times to a paradox which Gramsci scholars cannot ignore. The paradox can be formulated as follows: the more emphasis that is placed on historical and critical rigour in relation to the form in which to publish the prison notebooks, to the point at which it becomes a philological punctiliousness, the more Gramsci is distanced from those potential readers that he might have had in mind when he strove for an intellectual and moral reform and fought for an inversion of political and cultural hegemony.

The Debate over a New Critical Edition of Gramsci's Writings

More than ten years ago, Gianni Francioni argued that a new edition of the prison notebooks was needed.⁸ He made this proposal in the more general framework of the project for a national edition of the works of Antonio Gramsci which would comprise four sections, each one subdivided into several volumes: the first section would contain the writings from 1913 to 1926 (chronologically ordered); the second section, the prison notebooks; the third section, the correspondence; and the fourth section would comprise a whole series of documents (minutes of meetings, newspaper reviews, political resolutions, and so on) which are useful for an improved understanding of the biography and thought of Antonio Gramsci.

In reality, almost all the basic work for the critical edition of Gramsci's writings before 1927, and for the critical edition of Gramsci's correspondence, has already been carried out, and the fundamental part of what would constitute the fourth section of this new edition has already been published, although in separate volumes. As such, it is natural that the debate has centred precisely on the best form in which to publish the prison notebooks.

Francioni proposed to publish the prison notebooks in three parts. The first would comprise the notebooks dedicated by Gramsci to translations from German, Russian, French and English (1929–32); the second part would include the miscellaneous notebooks written between 1929 and 1935; and the

8 Francioni 1992.

third part would contain the so-called special notebooks (1932–5), in which Gramsci revised or reordered thematically many of the notes written previously. In comparison with Gerratana's edition, the most important innovations of this proposal are twofold: firstly, the inclusion of all the notebooks with the translations made by Gramsci between 1929 and 1932 (four complete notebooks and two partially completed ones);⁹ secondly, the separation of the other notebooks into miscellaneous and special ones, in order to attempt to follow Gramsci's last plan, at the same time refining the chronological order of the elaboration, both in terms of the fragmentary notes and the longer reflections upon a single dominant theme.

This idea, which in principle was intended to be an improvement on Valentino Gerratana's critical edition, seems to have ended up refuting itself (as indeed Gerratana himself anticipated when discussions about a future national edition of Gramsci's writings were initiated). This would seem to be another example, then, of how, sometimes, the better can turn out to be the enemy of the good. The reason for this, in this case, is simple – one might say elementary: it is one thing to capture the general rhythm of the thought of an author like Gramsci, beyond thematic divisions, and another matter entirely to attempt to reproduce this rhythm in each and every detail, striving meticulously to transfer to the printed page even his *lapsus* and those things (like the translations) to which Gramsci accorded a certain importance at a specific moment in time, but which he subsequently abandoned or relegated to the background.¹⁰

The philological restoration of the contents of the notebooks is, without doubt, the first objective of any historical-critical work. Moreover, the reinforcement of the philological rigour applied to Gramsci's notebooks can be an extremely interesting academic exercise, as is, to cite another example, the comparative study of the work of Galvano della Volpe, a philosopher who is unjustly forgotten today, in relation to the different variants of what started as 'logic as a positive science' and ended up as 'logic as a historical science'. This is the usual kind of work which is carried out, of course, in the publication of other classics, and, in principle there is no reason why it should arouse

9 In his edition, Gerratana opted for a meticulous description of the notebooks which Gramsci dedicated to his translations rather than to reproduce them in full. In support of this decision, he adduced two arguments: the translations were 'exercises' (as Gramsci himself said), and to include them would have supposed a 'pointless increase in the weight' of the critical edition. Cf. Gerratana 1997, p. 14. For the description of the notebooks dedicated to translations, cf. the critical apparatus in Gramsci 1975, pp. 2430 ff.

10 Gerratana 1992, pp. 63–9.

suspensions.¹¹ However, when taken to excess, philological rigour is transformed into punctiliousness, and it ends up having unexpected negative effects.¹² This is especially true in the case of an author like Gramsci. Why? Because Gramsci is a very particular classical author of the twentieth century: he is an *aficionado* of philology, but no professional philologist; a philosopher of praxis, but no academic philosopher with university degrees to his name; a theorist of politics, but above all a man of action, who addresses himself to men and women who want to radically change the world. For these reasons, the exaggerated punctiliousness of Francioni's editorial project, which is still underway, runs the risk of ending up dissuading irremissibly Gramsci's potential reader, above all if the reader happens to be just that: a reader, rather than an academic proofreader of Gramsci.¹³

Gramsci as a Classical Author

The argument advanced here will seem all the more convincing, I believe, the more we focus on the type of classical author that Gramsci has become. For it is true: Gramsci is already a classical author.¹⁴ On that we are all agreed. However, he is a very particular classical author. His works are contemporary classics of political thought. To put it more precisely: they are contemporary classics of communist political thought. This means that, in the notebooks as

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- 11 In fact, the investigation carried out by G. Francioni before he formulated his proposal for a new critical edition is of great interest: it allows us to date some of the notes drafted by Gramsci in each of the notebooks, it establishes suggestive hypotheses about others, and it throws new light on the structure of the notebooks and on the method followed by Gramsci in his work. Cf. in this regard Francioni 1984 and Francioni, 1990.
 - 12 During the debate on the new edition which took place in 1991 at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, other scholars called attention to these effects alongside Gerratana, such as Renzo Martinelli ('We run the risk of producing an illegible monument') and Joseph A. Buttigieg ('What is important is not that *experts* establish once and for all how the *Quaderni* should be presented and read; it is a question of furnishing a tool which will allow the reader to read and interpret the *Quaderni* in an intelligent way'). See *IG Informazioni* 2/1992, pp. 73 and 76.
 - 13 'The problem of the edition of Gramsci's works is not only a philological problem, but also a problem of political history and the history of culture *vis-à-vis* the past, and a political problem of culture *vis-à-vis* the present and the future' (Liguori 1999, p. 219).
 - 14 Manuel Sacristán insisted upon this at a time – the mid-1970s – when Gramsci was becoming fashionable; Valentino Gerratana has posed the question anew in his introduction to Gerratana 1997, pp. xi ff.

well, he wrote in the framework of an established tradition, with equally established linguistic norms and customs. These norms and customs were shared in their time by a considerable number of people, many of them workers, and not a few intellectuals; later, during the period of the greatest dissemination of Gramsci's writings (in the 1960s and 1970s), these norms and customs were shared by very many people, and of these, many were intellectuals; now, in the new century, they are shared by few people, and of these, very few are intellectuals, at least in Europe.

These linguistic norms and customs of the communist tradition included shared or implicitly understood terms which Gramsci revised or coined anew in the notebooks, partly because he was a creative Marxist thinker, and partly in order to outwit the prison censor. However, be that as it may, beneath his revised terminology, the concept remained – a concept intersubjectively shared in the framework of this tradition and widely understood for as long as Marxism remained, so to speak, part of the general culture of educated or enlightened workers.

Nonetheless, in some important aspects, the Marxist communist tradition, like other worldviews that have taken root in shared beliefs, has characteristically been more allusive than directly argumentative (Gramsci, too, sometimes uses quite an allusive language). This heritage has passed down to the Italian variant of the communist tradition (which is probably the best, or one of the best, in Europe). However, when this tradition was broken – and the Marxist communist tradition has certainly been broken – many of the allusive words which were once shared (with or without prejudice) have become incomprehensible, or almost so, for the great majority of people. This is especially true for the young people wishing to read Gramsci for the first time and who have difficulty in joining discussions which revolve around allusions or references which were once transparent.

The break in the tradition began to complicate the reading of the *Prison Notebooks* to a great extent in 1991, when the philological furore of some and the politicist urgency of others gave rise to the project for a new edition, which was to be a national one, and which was intended to be more critical than the previous ones. I remember commenting to Valentino Gerratana at the time on the difficulties which older European Gramscians were encountering when they recommended that young people read the *Prison Notebooks*. This was not only a formal difficulty, for if the word 'revolution' was only habitually used in order to speak of technical innovations or in commercial advertising, what would young people understand when they got to the Gramscian concept of 'passive revolution'? If the words 'totalitarianism' and 'totalitarian' had become widely accepted in contexts in which what was being talked about in reality

was a holistic and totalising thinking, how, in the absence of an adequate guide, would they comprehend the content of Gramsci's thought, which is indeed 'totalising' in methodological terms?

The ten years which have passed since that conversation have caused the paradox which I alluded to above to explode. On the one hand, a new edition of the notebooks was proposed in Italy which further complicated the access of new readers to Gramsci. The proposal was accompanied by the argument that, with the new distribution of the notebooks, we would discover a Gramsci who was more limpid, more transparent, more comprehensible in his political particularity within the communist tradition. On the other hand, the mass media were limiting interest in Gramsci to anecdotes relating to his private life, and to the politicist catalogue of his 'dissidences', almost always with a solely instrumental motivation. Furthermore, in the meantime, the market proved stronger than tradition, without the hypothetical academic virtues of the new edition coming anywhere close to surpassing what was achieved before by conviction, disinterested work and communist cultural politics. The advertised new edition had not yet seen the light of day, and Gerratana's edition, much praised by all, was already beginning to disappear from the shelves of Italian bookshops. As the year 2000 approached, the situation was almost comical: the critical edition of 1975 was not available, there was no news of the new edition, and, in Gramsci's own country, those still interested in reading him found themselves obliged to resort to the new anthologies of parts of the notebooks which came to replace the old thematic anthologies.¹⁵

Fragmentary Form, Totalising Content

The strikingly fragmented form of the *Prison Notebooks* (comprising notes of varying dimensions, articles, sketches, essays, explorations, commentaries and reviews of books by other authors) contrasts with the totalising dimension of their contents. The ultimate and declared goal of Gramsci was to contribute to the moral and intellectual reform of the society in which he lived. Moral and intellectual reform means, in his case, the improvement and transformation of this 'central node' of multiple relations (with nature and with other people) that is the human being, as a member both of a species with *logos* and of a historically specific society. For Gramsci, moral and intellectual reform implies the regeneration of humankind and society, the reappropriation and enhancement of every aspect of our concrete being, against the prevailing

15 Cf. 'Guide to Reading Gramsci' at the end of this volume.

divisions and fragmentations (according to sex, class, nation, guild, profession, or corporation).

Gramsci considered that this reappropriation and enhancement of humanity as a whole requires an inversion in the socio-cultural hegemony which has prevailed under capitalism in the last centuries. Hegemony is a key concept in the *Prison Notebooks*. The concept refers to the domination, both economic and political, of one class or social bloc over others via the state, and also to the consensus and consent of those who form the majority. Both these things, domination and consensus, are always interrelated. Furthermore, one of the characteristics of capitalist modernity is that it has accentuated the fragmentation and the divisions in the concrete whole formed by human beings, precisely in order to reinforce consensus and to legitimate itself.

The subaltern classes or social groups have every right, although this right is an unwritten one, to contest the hegemony (in the sense outlined above) of the ruling classes and to attempt to invert the polarity of existing socio-economic domination. The forms or ways in which they can do this will depend precisely on the type of relation that exists between state domination and consensus, that is to say, on the given balance of forces, or the relative weight that state and civil society have in each case. This is where the concrete analysis of the concrete situation, the study of the balance of forces, becomes all-important. For the form in which the state and civil society are articulated has not been the same in Russia as in Italy, or in Germany, in England or in the USA. The totalising goal, which remains moral and intellectual reform in a socialist, egalitarian sense, is thus traversed in Gramsci's works by the historical and sociological analysis of the differences – of the really existing socio-cultural diversity – characterising any specific historical moment.

Against the background of this central idea, which is the contestation of the hegemony of the dominant classes and social groupings, Gramsci pays particular attention in the *Prison Notebooks* to the comparative analysis of the different forms in which domination and consensus have been articulated in the modern era. Gramsci thus focuses on the comparison between 'east' (specifically, Russia) and 'west' (specifically, Western Europe); the comparison between 'Europeanism' and 'Americanism' in the cultural sphere (in a broad sense); the historical shift underway since the mid-1920s in comparison with the situation at the end of the First World War; the shifting balances of forces deriving from this historical shift; and, above all, the particular Italian experience throughout modern history.

If we take into account the bibliographical and time constraints deriving from his situation in prison, what Gramsci could offer his potential readers in writing about each of these themes were indications of a general,

methodological kind, or critical reflections on political attitudes and intellectual behaviours which were very widespread, and which, in his opinion, represented an obstacle to the ultimate goal of inverting socio-cultural hegemony. In the methodological aspect, what Gramsci did was to originate, outline or recast concepts of interest for political science or for socio-cultural analysis (the very notion of *hegemony*, the notion of *historical bloc*, the concept of *passive revolution*, etc.). On the level of socio-cultural criticism, Gramsci elaborated arguments in order to eradicate very widespread inherited prejudices in the society of his time. Such arguments focused, for example, on the customary manner in which the relation between ethics and politics, or between public and private virtues, was understood; the persistence of Caesarism; the tendency of intellectuals and politicians to 'transformism'; politicist sectarianism, and similar phenomena.

I believe, in short, that the best way to introduce oneself to the *Prison Notebooks* is to consider them as a whole as a reflection on the totality of the activity of communist humankind, which Gramsci tends to identify with the popular creative spirit of his time. At the same time, it is necessary to understand his context, his circumstances, as a critical moment in the history of Italy and Europe: a phase in which the old has not yet perished, and the new has not yet seen the light of day, but in which, in spite of everything, hope in the new birth is maintained. The author of the notebooks is a man who *has hope*, but *is under no illusions*. It is this reflection of a globalising nature, which is at the same time a hopeful one (above all in the sphere of collective life), which leads Gramsci to deal with culture in its different forms. Thus he focuses on the various historical civilisations and conceptions of the world, and the common sense which is represented in them; he asks what the Catholic religion is in comparison with other religions; he considers philosophy, history and historiography, politics, language, schools and education in general, the role of intellectuals, and the question of literary productivity.

In Search of an Adequate Form of Expression

Gramsci's reflections in the *Prison Notebooks* cannot be assimilated to the discourse of the traditional, academic or professorial philosopher, nor to that of the habitual Marxist ideologue who aspires to write the corresponding manual, encyclopaedic entry or definitive sociological analysis when dealing with problems which extend beyond the field of politics. Nor can Gramsci's reflections be compared with his own activity before his arrest, between 1918 and 1926,

which was essentially a political journalism carried out daily or weekly with rigour and creativity, but which had immediate goals.

In prison, as he drafted his notebooks, Gramsci had to develop a style of his own; he had to make a considerable effort to give his thoughts an adequate form of expression. Prison was of course, in a primary sense, a laboratory for the notebooks. This point is often repeated these days. However, any person who has been in prison as a political prisoner under a fascist régime would surely respond with a wry smile if they saw the word 'laboratory' used to refer to these conditions. Indeed, this is to assume the best of cases: that such a person has managed to retain their sense of humour after the experience. To write in prison in such conditions, thinking about how to write, for whom one is writing, and, above all, how to salvage what is being written, scarcely bears any relation to the familiar scenario of the writer confronted by a blank page.

This is the first thing which has to be explained to young Europeans wanting to delve into Gramsci's notebooks. This is not in order to paint hagiographic portraits, nor to revisit the heroic frenzies of martyrologies (which, to be sure, Gramsci found repugnant even when he was suffering most in prison), but simply to put things in their place, for the sake of historical memory, and also to suggest, in passing, that not everything is relevant today in what Gramsci wrote.

Such an explanation requires an intellectual effort similar, with appropriate disclaimers, to that which Primo Levi had to make when, with the memory of the offending events still fresh, he was surprised that he had to explain to Italian adolescents why it was that in Auschwitz people could not behave like the protagonists of *The Great Escape* or *Escape to Victory*.¹⁶ This, then, is the point at which the letters which Gramsci wrote from prison to members of his family become indispensable for an informed and careful reading of the notebooks. This is not only because of the indications which are to be found in these letters as to what their author was writing in the notebooks (the letters are indeed useful in this regard), but because of something prior and more fundamental, but which is sometimes forgotten: the letters are crucial *for an understanding of what prison notebooks (written lowercase) really mean*.

Gramsci's own inclinations, which can already be appreciated behind his decision to abandon his university studies in order to take up political and cultural journalism, did not change substantially between 1914 and 1935. Gramsci was never the conventional intellectual who would write at great length or systematically; he did not want to be a 'conformist intellectual' or a

16 Levi 1976, appendix, pp. 227 ff.

‘tui’ (to use Brecht’s sarcastic expression).¹⁷ Gramsci was a Socratic thinker profoundly preoccupied by practical matters and by the practical consequences of his own writings. He insisted on several occasions in his letters to his wife, Giulia Schucht, to his sister-in-law, Tatiana, and his brother, Carlo, that he had always been a practical person, and in prison itself he had given more than enough proof of this with his behaviour for his word to be taken on this score. Naturally, the practical character of a man of profound convictions, who has been imprisoned for political reasons, and who is isolated and in a dreadful state of health, is not a sufficient condition in order for tragedy to be avoided. That is another question, however.¹⁸

For Gramsci, dialogue and polemic were always characteristic of his own activity. It is understandable, then, that he immediately realised that, in his case, to write in prison with a certain distance, ‘disinterestedly’, still meant entering into dialogue and polemicising with others, albeit in a new and unfamiliar situation. This is why he strongly emphasises this idiosyncratic aspect of his in an oft-cited letter addressed to Tatiana in 1927, precisely in the context of clarifying his first work plan. His dialogical approach determines the style of his prison writings – in his correspondence, as in his notebooks.

Some of the most interesting reflections and the most acute theoretical proposals of the notebooks originate in Gramsci’s reading of the texts of others, in his criticism of them or of what these texts initially suggest to him. Sometimes the critical dialogue is explicit and sustained (such as with Benedetto Croce or Nikolai Bukharin). On other occasions, a sentence read casually in a text by another author, or while carrying out bibliographical research in order to develop one of the themes that he had previously identified, provokes a shift in his thinking, such that he ends up dealing with a matter very distinct from his starting point. Gramsci referred to this practice of his as ‘squeezing juice from a dried fig’. He had a nose and a talent for this. In prison he developed them to the full. However, as the philologist that he had once been, and as a result of his moral and intellectual rigour, he also knew the limits of this approach. The knowledge of these limits caused him a certain dissatisfaction precisely when it came to his attempts to develop those themes to which he wanted to dedicate himself most disinterestedly, with the greatest intensity and in the greatest depth.

17 ‘Tuis’ or ‘little intellectuals’ were the terms Bertolt Brecht used to describe intellectuals ‘with domesticated intellects’. During his exile in Denmark, he even wrote a fragment for a novella on this theme: *Der tui-Roman* (*The Novel of the Tui* or *The Tui-Novel*).

18 I deal with this question in the chapter on ‘Love and Revolution’ in this volume.

As he set out to draft the notebooks, Gramsci was obliged to find a new form. From 1918 until 1926, he had essentially engaged in political journalism, and had become accustomed to writing in party journals for those near to him and on political, trade union or political and cultural themes in a direct style (which was also appreciated by people who were not from his own tradition). However, this journalistic style could not be used in prison, because it would have represented a risk. He was thus obliged to invent a different style according to his own situation and that of those of his comrades who were in prison with him, and also bearing in mind those people who might one day read what he was writing.

This struggle over the form and the style to be adopted by the thinker and man of action, who was in prison but who was determined not to be carried away by 'prisonitis', also had an effect on the level of Gramsci's private communication (his correspondence with Giulia and Tatiana Schucht). There are in fact many letters addressed to Giulia and to Tatiana between 1927 and 1936 which are a testament to this effort on the part of Gramsci. Gramsci suffered in his correspondence with Giulia Schucht, because he never quite found the free form of expression that he was looking for. What occurred in this case can be expressed as follows: an old problem of his became exacerbated, namely his tendency to be emotionally reserved, which had already manifested itself in the love letters which he wrote while living in Vienna. Now, in prison, he puts it as follows: 'I'm always obsessed by the thought of being reduced to conventional epistolography and, what is worse than conventionality, to a conventional prison epistolography'.¹⁹ As the years passed, and as a result of the distance and the misunderstandings, his isolation, his illness, and his approaching death, Gramsci's preoccupation with the form of expression was intensified, especially as he progressively lost the sense of humour and self-irony with which he had previously compensated for the fact that he was emotionally reserved.

There is a certain moment when Gramsci considers these two difficulties together: this occurs in prison in Turi when, having received permission to write the notebooks, he is considering setting about writing the first of them. In a letter which he addresses to Giulia at the time, he begins by making a reference to his difficulties in expressing himself, to the kind of inhibition which he feels in private correspondence: 'I believe this is due to the modern education of our minds, which has not yet found its own adequate means of expression. I'm always a bit sceptical and ironic, and it seems to me that if I were to express all that I wish I would be unable to go beyond a certain conventionalism and

19 Letter to Giulia Schucht of 2 May 1927, Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 109.

a certain melodramatic tone, which is almost incorporated in traditional language'. However, Gramsci then moves on to his other, more general preoccupation, which is related to the form of the notebooks that he proposes to write: 'The selfsame professional study that I've made of the technical forms of language obsesses me, setting before me again all my utterances in fossilized and ossified forms that arouse my repugnance'.²⁰

To Do Something *für ewig*

Not everything in the notebooks is directly determined by Gramsci's internalisation of the drama of his prison life. In fact, it would seem that many of the notes and reflections are the result of the Titanic effort he made to detach himself from this drama, from the suffering and the adversity he was living through. Some of the entries in the notebooks correspond to the preoccupations of the academic philologist that Gramsci might have been, were it not for the intervention in his life of the First World War, the councils movement in Turin, the founding of the Communist Party of Italy, the implantation of Fascism, prison and illness.

Moreover, from the first months following his arrest, Gramsci had felt the need to adhere to a programme of work and study. However, this was not because he believed that he would be able to plan his intellectual life in prison in detail, which was something that went against his character, but precisely because of the importance he attached to intellectual order when it came to the maintenance of a spirit of resistance in general, and in his own case in particular. Gramsci's philological, social and historiographical inclinations are always evident in the various plans for readings, studies and potential texts of his own that he left. While in exile on Ustica, he already established a first programme which connects these inclinations to the basic material conditions that he would need in order to resist, as follows: '1) to feel well in order to feel always better in health; 2) to study German and Russian with method and persistence; 3) to study economics and history'.²¹

However, the particular final structure of the notebooks cannot be explained only in terms of Gramsci's formulation of these plans, nor through a particular

20 Letter to Giulia Schucht of 9 February 1929, Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 247.

21 Letter to Tatiana Schucht of 9 December 1926, Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 41. Already in this letter Gramsci requests grammar books, dictionaries and a study on the Italian *Risorgimento*. Two days later, Gramsci wrote to Piero Sraffa asking him for a good treatise on economics and finance.

analysis of certain important concepts that he devised on this basis. In order to fully comprehend this structure, it is necessary to take into account the successive changes in the plans. Gramsci explicitly makes reference to these changes on several occasions; in some cases, however, he does not indicate that he has modified the previous plan, or he omits to specify the changes in full. What is important is to emphasise that both Gramsci's formulation of his work and study plans, as well as their successive modification, are inseparable from the evolution in the thinking of a man who is confronting the problem of illness and the premonition of death in prison, at first patiently and with equanimity, but subsequently with a certain anxiety. In the famous letter in which Gramsci communicates his first plan of studies to Tatiana Schucht from the San Vittore Prison in Milan,²² there is already a certain awareness on his part that what he is proposing in order to centre his life in those conditions is surely too ambitious. Indeed, there is a certain dark self-irony alongside this awareness.

Gramsci states in this letter that he has come up with four themes: 1) an investigation into the formation of public spirit in Italy during the nineteenth century (Italian intellectuals, their origins, their groupings according to different cultural currents and their respective modes of thinking; 2) a comparative linguistic study, although limited to methodological and purely theoretical considerations; 3) a study of Pirandello's plays and of the transformation in Italian taste in theatre represented by Pirandello, a transformation which the latter has partly determined; and 4) an essay on the serial novel and popular taste in literature. Gramsci makes the observation to his interlocutor that there is a homogeneity between the four themes that he proposes to study. The core or foundation of all of them will be the study of the popular creative spirit, in its various phases and degrees of development.

The enumeration of these themes is preceded by an introspective reflection and is also accompanied by some brief but significant comments. Gramsci's reflection goes as follows: 'I have become obsessed (this is a phenomenon typical of people in jail, I think) by this idea: that I should do something *für ewig*, following a complex concept of Goethe's that as I remember tormented our Pascoli a great deal. In short, in keeping with a pre-established programme, I would like to concentrate intensely and systematically on some subject that would absorb and provide a center to my inner life'. At least two of the comments that Gramsci makes as he enumerates his list of themes reveal that he was under no illusions as to the chances that he would be able to fulfil his plan, and that he was already aware of the difficulty that it posed as he formulated it. First, he states that the fact that he has thought of four topics is an indication

22 Letter to Tatiana Schucht of 19 March 1927, Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 83–6.

that he is having difficulty concentrating. Then, when he announces his intention to carry out a study of comparative linguistics, he uses exclamation marks and immediately adds: 'nothing less'.²³

Thus, the first plan of studies drawn up by Gramsci in the Milanese prison was not merely intended to aid his internal concentration and to stop him from losing focus while he served his sentence; it also connected with his intellectual preoccupations (as a philologist) prior to the period of his increased political engagement on the one hand, and, on the other, it anticipated a further elaboration of the most substantial political and theoretical text that he had drafted before his arrest; this was his earlier work on the Southern question, which had remained unfinished.²⁴ It should be noted that Gramsci insists that he proposes to undertake this task 'disinterestedly', such that directly political or ideological concerns will form the backdrop to the investigation, or constitute its unifying thread. These concerns are not alluded to in the formulation of the plan, undoubtedly because Gramsci wanted to avoid any conflict just when he had been granted permission to write. In this regard, it should be remembered, furthermore, that the letter to Tatiana in which he outlines the plan was written before the trial was held, and probably in the hope that his sentence would not be as heavy as it would prove to be (20 years, four months and one day in prison).

Gramsci's project of a 'disinterested' study and reworking of the Southern question is to be interpreted in the sense that he intended at the time to consolidate and develop his main thesis more broadly, which is to say, in terms which were not strictly conjunctural; in his previous text, it had been expressed in predominantly political terms. In a spirit of self-criticism and intellectual rigour, Gramsci now characterises his 1926 text on the southern question as 'very hasty and quite superficial'. But how should the idea of doing something *für ewig* (for ever), as if oscillating between Goethe's 'Olympianism' and Pascoli's conception, be interpreted? This is undoubtedly self-irony on Gramsci's part: he probably intended to allude in this way to the paradox resulting from the fact that he now found it possible to pass from a mode of thinking which was immediatist, conditioned by political exigencies, to one which was broader, more open, and less conjunctural, precisely in a situation of unfreedom – i.e., in the worst possible conditions for academic work. It was surely no coincidence that, in communicating the idea of undertaking work *für ewig*, Gramsci also alluded to other themes such as philology and theatre criticism that had interested him in the years preceding his exclusive dedication to politics.

23 Letter to Tatiana Schucht of 19 March 1927, Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 83.

24 Gramsci 1974; cf. Gramsci 1978, pp. 441–62.

This self-ironic form of writing, tinged with dark humour, is a characteristic trait of Gramsci's correspondence.

In his preface to the critical edition of the prison notebooks, Gerratana has already pointed out that the idea of the eternal is related to that of death in a poem by Giovanni Pascoli, and that it is this conception of *für ewig* to which Gramsci refers in this letter.²⁵ Gerratana himself then emphasises that, in order to understand this passage, it is essential to bear in mind that when Gramsci conceived the plan of the notebooks, he did not intend to write for an immediate public or for immediate effect, but for ideal readers whose existence he had to assume, without knowing for sure that these readers would ever exist.

In the Meantime: The Study of Languages

When this first project is compared with what Gramsci ultimately wrote in the *Prison Notebooks*, the conclusion is soon reached that he only partially fulfilled the plan that he had outlined. He maintained the basic orientation, of course: the investigation of the popular creative spirit throughout history. Indeed, Gramsci dedicated a considerable amount of space in his notebooks to the study of the formation and development of the public spirit in Italy, with special attention to the role of intellectuals. He drafted a smaller number of notes and reflections on theoretical and methodological questions of comparative linguistics and popular taste in literature. However, he abandoned the idea of studying the plays of Luigi Pirandello and the transformation of Italian tastes in theatre at length. On the other hand, he broadened the initial historicist dimension, going into much more depth than he originally anticipated into questions of theory and methodology which were relevant for historiography and politics. It is evident, moreover, that none of these investigations would ultimately have the systematic character that he initially intended.

In order to understand this disjunction, two things must be taken into account. The first is fairly obvious and does not merit further comments in Gramsci's case, although perhaps it is worth mentioning here: it is one thing to advance a plan of study and work, and another to actually set about writing. The second consideration refers to a change in circumstances affecting the man who had conceived the project: between the time when Gramsci

25 Gerratana's prologue to Gramsci 1975, p. xvii. In the *Canti de Castelvechio*, Pascoli had written: 'You are a girl and you don't know what *for ever* means. *For ever* means dying...' Manuel Sacristán gives the Spanish translation of Pascoli's poem in his prologue to Gramsci 1985.

communicated his first plan of studies to Tatiana Schucht from the San Vittore prison, in Milan, and receiving permission to write the notebooks, already in the prison of Turi de Bari, almost two years had passed. In this regard, it should be recalled that when Gramsci announced his first plan, in March 1927, he was only allowed to write a limited number of letters by the prison authorities. Gramsci did not obtain authorisation to begin writing the notebooks in his cell until the end of January 1929.²⁶

Does this mean that Gramsci's first project should be understood as a plan of *studies*, and not as a first plan of *the writings*? The answer is . . . not exactly. When he formulated the project, Gramsci thought that he would be able to write in his cell in the Milan prison. He had presented an application to this effect to the examining magistrate, and he was undoubtedly counting on being granted the relevant permit. However, his request was denied, and, as he did not wish to make a new application, this became the first important obstacle to his plan. He states very explicitly in another letter to Tatiana: 'I thought I might be able to obtain the permanent use of a pen, and I had planned *to write the studies that I mentioned*; but I did not receive the necessary permit and don't like to insist.'²⁷

Thus it was the material impossibility of writing that caused the failure of Gramsci's first plan of studies. In May 1927, he had already reached the conclusion that his planned studies would prove impossible. Although he alludes to various reasons, which are not only psychological but also technical, he emphasises one: 'it is very difficult for me to become completely absorbed in a train of thought or subject and delve into it alone, as one does when one studies seriously, so as to grasp all possible relationships and connect them harmoniously'. This difficulty in embarking upon serious, systematic study did not depend exclusively on his living conditions in prison, but also had to do with Gramsci's own character, with his form of being and working. He had received an education which was polemical and critical, and he had dialogical inclinations, which meant that he needed to measure himself with others in his studies and in his intellectual work too, in order to feel the existence of an interlocutor with whom he could maintain a dialogue and exchange ideas. It was only in the field of philology, during his university studies, that had he accustomed himself to systematic study, and consequently it is not surprising that, in the solitude of prison, and acknowledging the difficulties he faced

26 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, January 29, 1929, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 244.

27 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, 11 April 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 94–5. The same theme is taken up in the letters of 12 December 1927, and 20 February 1928, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 160 and 176 respectively.

on account of his character as well as his circumstances, he should decide to make his main activity the study of languages. In this decision, which he communicates to Tatiana in the same letter of May 1927, he envisages a systematic study of German and Russian, to be followed by English, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian.²⁸

There are sufficient testimonies which corroborate the fact that Gramsci did indeed dedicate an important part of his time in the San Vittore prison to the study of languages. He had already set about studying a German grammar between March and April 1927, before communicating his decision to Tatiana. In early October, he requested a book by F.N. Finck, *Die Sprachstämme des Erdkreises*, a classification of the languages of the world, which he later translated into Italian. In March 1928, when he began to offload some of his own books in preparation for his transfer in the context of his court case, he took his German grammars with him. Then, in July of the same year, after the trial and during his transfer to the Turi prison, he expressed his wish that especially his grammars and his German dictionary be sent to him there.

In fact, in the passing months until his trial was held and he was transferred to the prison in Turi de Bari, Gramsci alternated between reading various texts and studying languages, sometimes as a result of his difficulties in concentrating. Some of his reading was casual, as for example on the occasion of Machiavelli's centenary,²⁹ although it would still be reflected in the notebooks; at other times it corresponded to very specific requests made by him which connected to a certain extent with the topics of his first work plan or with his philological studies, as in the case of the *Manualetto de Linguistica* by Bertoni and Bartoli. In a moment of equanimity and good humour, Gramsci allows himself another use of irony in connection with the latter work, once again recalling the theme of *für ewig* and demonstrating, incidentally, that in March 1927 he did not only intend to study but also to write. Gramsci now declares that he has had to abandon the idea of writing for reasons beyond his control, and jokes about what could have been 'a model for present and future intellectual prison endeavors', while expressing the concern that these ideas might, given the relatively public nature of his correspondence, fall into the hands of some student of philology looking for a subject for his or her doctoral thesis, such that he himself would be frustrated in his attempt to achieve fame with his lucubration.³⁰

28 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, May 23, 1927, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 112.

29 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 153 and p. 160.

30 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 160.

It was in this way that the concrete form of 'disinterested' study and writing that Gramsci proposed to undertake took shape. Various factors intervened which Gramsci himself was unable to foresee in March 1927, or to which he did not pay sufficient heed: the dire conditions for study in prison (which were worse than he had imagined); the solitude, the isolation and the lack of an intellectual interlocutor; and also the deterioration in his health, with the resulting changes in his state of mind. Given the interrelation between these three factors, it is difficult to say which of them affected Gramsci most in the period up to 1929. In his correspondence from those months, he alluded to all three alternately in order to justify changes to his initial plan, or to explain the reason why he no longer had any plan at all, when asked by others – by Tatiana and Giulia Schucht, his niece Teresina and Giuseppe Berti. Given his strong-willed character and his spirit of resistance, the most reasonable thing to conclude is that Gramsci experienced the obstacles he encountered in prison, his solitude and his illness as inseparable difficulties facing his initial project.

It is in Gramsci's enforced adaptation to these obstacles that we must look for his particular contribution to the complex conception of Goethe's *für ewig* in Pascoli's sense. The references which Gramsci makes in the letters written between 1927 and 1929 to 'prisonitis' (and to the accounts which others wrote while in prison) can be read as the concretisation of his dialogue in an ironic tone with, on the one hand, the 'Olympianism' of Goethe (which is inadmissible for a man who is politically engaged and who has given a moral priority to his commitment to the liberation of others), and, on the other, with this disquieting conception of Pascoli, who approximates the idea of 'for ever' to the feeling of death in the context of a love poem. For the historicist and polemical Gramsci, this ironic dialogue with two conceptions of the past, which were apposite in his case, although he did not share them, acted in a certain fashion as a substitute for the intellectual dialogue that he would have needed in the present and which he could not obtain in prison.

The Subject Matter of the Notebooks and Translation Exercises

Gramsci wrote the first page of the first prison notebook on 8 February 1929. Under the title 'Notes and jottings. Main topics', he enumerates the 16 following subjects: 1) Theory of history and historiography; 2) Development of the Italian bourgeoisie up to 1870; 3) Formation of Italian intellectual groups...; 4) The popular literature of 'serial novels' and the reasons for its continued success; 5) Cavalcante Cavalcanti: his position in the structure and art of the *Divine Comedy*; 6) Origins and development of Catholic Action in Italy and

in Europe; 7) The concept of folklore; 8) Experiences of prison life; 9) The 'southern question' and the question of the islands; 10) Observations on the Italian population: its composition, function of emigration; 11) Americanism and Fordism; 12) The question of language in Italy (...); 13) 'Common sense'; 14) Types of periodicals (...); 15) Neo-grammarians and neo-linguists (...); 16) Father Bresciani's progeny.³¹

The comparison with the plan Gramsci communicated to Tatiana from the Milan prison demonstrates that in this new project the idea of carrying out a study into Pirandello's plays has disappeared. On the other hand, the other topics previously proposed are now included and integrated within a broader arrangement. Other completely new themes now appear alongside them. In general, however, it is clear that when Gramsci obtained permission to begin writing the first of the notebooks, the basic subjects of his initial plan were retained, with only several variations. This is confirmed, moreover, by a letter addressed to Tatiana on March 25 of that same year,³² in which, in addition to requesting a list of books which he would like to have in Turi, he announces his intention of dealing with the following subjects: 1) Italian history in the nineteenth century, with special attention to the formation and development of intellectual groups; 2) the theory of history and historiography; 3) Americanism and Fordism.

However, Gramsci did not then proceed to write the second page of the first notebook immediately. In fact, four months were to pass between the note announcing the new plan, which has something of the function of a general index of the notebooks, and the first notes actually drafted (which are mostly dedicated to commenting on books and journals on various subjects). Why did Gramsci wait four months if his plan was already clear?³³ During this period, Gramsci was not in a bad state of health; his state of mind, as revealed by his letters to Tatiana, his mother and his brother Carlo, was relatively serene; and his correspondence with Giulia showed that their relationship was not passing through a particularly difficult stage. We can thus discount any health-related, mental or emotional problems on the part of Gramsci, even though these would indeed become omnipresent in the following years. With this in mind, we can establish the hypothesis that the delay was due in part to Gramsci's desire to continue with his studies of languages, and in part to his uncertainty

31 Gramsci 1992b, vol. 1, p. 99.

32 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 256–60.

33 For the context, see Gerratana 1997, pp. 34–5. G. Baratta focuses on the question of why Gramsci took so long in setting about writing after he had drafted the first page of the first notebook: Baratta 2000, pp. 32 ff.

as to which form to give to the elaboration of the 16 topics; perhaps it was also due to his awareness of the inadequacy of the bibliography at his disposal in prison at that time.

In any case, it is true that Gramsci began what might be called a period of withdrawal during those four months in 1929. He dedicated the greater part of his time to the study of languages and to translations. In letters written to Tatiana at the time, he gives reasons for his dedication to translations: they help him 'limber up' and calm his nerves.³⁴ This dedication was not merely temporary, however. Shortly after composing the first entries in the first notebook, Gramsci reports that he is still translating, although for the moment only from German, and that he has the intention of translating from Russian the following year. Gramsci did in fact proceed in this way, working for months on writing the first notebooks and on other 'translation exercises' simultaneously. Between 1929 and 1932 he translated individual poems by Goethe, in addition to the above-mentioned book by F.N. Finck, fairy tales by the brothers Grimm, a monographic issue of the journal *Die Literarische Welt* dedicated to literature in the USA, parts of J.P. Eckermann's tome, *Goethes Gespräch mit Eckermann*, various texts from an anthology of Karl Marx's writings, an anthology of Russian authors and some brief passages by English authors.³⁵

In recent years, there has been a re-evaluation of Gramsci's work as a translator. Contributions to this effort include: the particular analysis of Gramsci's translations from German carried out by Lucia Borghese; the demonstration that there is a relation between the essays contained in *Die Literarische Welt* and the notes Gramsci dedicated to Americanism and Fordism; and the investigation of the connection between Gramsci's translations of texts by Marx and the former's notes on philology and methodology in relation to Marxism which are contained in other notebooks. Taking these investigations as a base, and, above all, establishing the precise location of the translations among the notebooks drafted in the Turi de Bari prison, Gianni Francioni is able to conclude that they 'are inscribed, to all intents and purposes, in the plan that Gramsci had in mind when he set out to draft the notebooks'; in other words, the translations are an inseparable and 'organic part' of that plan of studies and writings.³⁶

It can be surmised that the study of languages and the dedication to translations fulfilled a quadruple function for Gramsci at the time: to improve his own

34 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, pp. 246 and 253.

35 Gramsci 1975, pp. 2430–41. More details can be found in Borghese 1981; and in Francioni 1992, pp. 111–30.

36 Francioni 1992, p. 88.

education so as to be able to master the bibliography that he wished to refer to in the case of some of the 16 topics outlined (namely, the theory of history, Americanism and Fordism, common sense, and types of periodicals); to connect with the *penchant* for philology and linguistic theory that he had when he was a university student and which, as has been shown, he retained when he was able to distance himself somewhat from immediate political activity; to renew his bond with Giulia (which was not merely an affective one), as he had done in Vienna, through study of the Russian language and the translation of some texts; and finally, to find a paedagogical mode of long-distance communication with his sons Delio and Giuliano through the translation of some fairy tales by the brothers Grimm.

Methodological and Stylistic Criteria

As Valentino Gerratana has established in his introduction to the critical edition, the prison notebooks were written in three phases. In the first of these, which spanned from 1929 to 1931, Gramsci drafted seven notebooks, in addition to the ones dedicated to translations. All of these are miscellaneous in terms of their content. In the second phase of the writing process, which extended from the end of 1931 to the end of 1933 (when he was transferred to a clinic in Formia), Gramsci composed another ten notebooks. Although the end of this period, from March 1933 onwards, was already very much conditioned by the prisoner's poor state of health and by his struggle to overcome his physical and psychological afflictions, the period as a whole was very productive in terms of the writing process. During this time, Gramsci gave a practically definitive form to the most significant monographic notebooks and formulated various of the concepts which were to prove most interesting in terms of philosophy and political science. In the third and final phase, in the clinic in Formia (1934–5), Gramsci used another twelve notebooks, but the majority of them remained incomplete, and in some of them he wrote only a few pages. Given his state of health, which was grave by then, he had to limit himself in the majority of cases to reordering material from previous years and to mechanically transcribing some of those notes and reflections, although, in some cases, he still modified and elaborated them further.

As he advanced in the composition of the notebooks, Gramsci asked himself several times what the criteria should be for writing in those circumstances, above all in relation to his reflections of a monographic character which were to go beyond the dimension of isolated notes or mere commentaries upon books and journals he had read in prison. From the outset, he considered that

what he was writing had a provisional character. Accordingly, when he revised what he had written previously in order to reorder it thematically, he warns that the ideas expressed are a first approximation to each of the topics covered. In the case of his work on the history of Italian intellectuals, which was the subject to which he devoted the most time and space from 1929 onwards, Gramsci is even more explicit: he states that it is very possible that subsequent investigations might lead to findings which contradict his own.³⁷

There is no single, homogeneous and sustained criterion in Gramsci's writing on the different themes that appear in the notebooks. In his treatment of most of them, he adhered to his initial criterion of writing 'disinterestedly', avoiding immediacy, along the Goethean-Pascolian lines alluded to above, although in the knowledge that this also implied a certain contradiction in his case. In order to fully understand this criterion, it is instructive to recall a reflection of his in this regard. In one of the miscellaneous notes in the second notebook, Gramsci cites Pascoli: 'Nor will I always discuss the same issues: I will speak of art and literature and science and morals. I will always be trying to eradicate prejudices and to set *Ewig* against fashion and to contrast the present with the past and the future'. Gramsci adds the following comment: 'And he failed to notice the inner contradiction he was floundering in, if his understanding of *Ewig* were correct.'³⁸ The criterion, then, is to go against fashion, but drawing a connection between past and present (as reflected in the title of one of the divisions of the notebooks) in order to fertilise the fields of the future.

A second criterion is derived from Gramsci's own conception of intellectual order, which is a conception he reiterated from his youth to his last years. He was convinced that there is a direct and reciprocal relation between intellectual and moral disorder. In the face of such disorder, his declared aspiration was to contribute to educating people to be sober and patient, so that they 'do not despair in the face of the worst horrors and [...] do not become exuberant with every silliness'. This is essentially the meaning that the formulation 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' assumes in the notebooks.³⁹ This is a recurrent preoccupation, which also appears in the draft of a letter to Giulia, written in February 1932, as follows: 'Intellectual order and moral order in conflict: their reconciliation in a *juridical order* that might appear as purely formal, but which in reality represents a moment of the movement of development. Serenity must have moral sobriety as its foundation – that is, an awareness

37 Gramsci 2011b, p. 231 [Q.8].

38 Gramsci 1992b, p. 297 [Q.2, §51].

39 Gramsci 1992b, p. 172 [Q.1, §63].

of the limits that one places on oneself, and which are not imposed. Against romantic inebriation'.⁴⁰

A third criterion explicitly defended by Gramsci in the notebooks is that of repetition. This criterion has to do with two considerations: the knowledge that one is writing in the framework of a specific tradition, and the implicit reflection on the question as to who might be the potential readers of what is being written. Gramsci considered patient and systematic repetition to be a fundamental methodological principle. However, he does not endorse any kind of repetition, least of all the mechanical repetition of one's own principles. By adequate repetition, which is neither mechanical nor material, he understands the adaptation of each concept to diverse peculiarities, 'presenting and re-presenting it in all its positive aspects and in its traditional negations, always ordering each partial aspect in the totality. Finding the real identity underneath the apparent differentiation and contradiction and finding the substantial diversity underneath the apparent identity'.⁴¹ Gramsci is no man of letters in search of originality. He is a political leader who is writing within a tradition, who is thinking in continuity with the founders of this tradition, and even when he sets out to write disinterestedly – with a distance from immediate political concerns – he endeavours to take a paedagogical approach, to be useful to others. However, in addition to being someone who is politically engaged, he is also a critical historian of ideas. It is for this reason, then, that he understands the paedagogical function in the best sense that the term 'paedagogy' can have in the context of an established tradition: not as indoctrination, but rather as education and enlightenment.

In the longer notes and essays that he dedicates to socio-political analysis and to cultural criticism, on the other hand, Gramsci tends towards sarcasm as opposed to romantic irony and moralism. In these entries in the notebooks, he attaches much importance to the question of young people, the role of tradition, the relation between tradition and innovation, the struggle between generations and intergenerational relations in the conquest of hegemony.⁴² He considers it an essential task to contribute to the formation of an alternative and creative popular spirit. This leads him to a specification of the type of sarcasm that is historically convenient. He thus poses a question that is not only

40 Gramsci 1975, pp. 2399–400. Symptomatically, a critical consideration of psychoanalysis follows in this context.

41 Gramsci 1992b, p. 128 [Q.1, §43]. The context in this case is a critical consideration of types of periodicals.

42 Gramsci 1992b, pp. 212–13 [Q.1, §127].

one of style, but also of method in a broad sense (which includes the questions of style, standpoint and the form of exposition of ideas).

When Gramsci broaches this matter in one of the first entries in the first notebook, undoubtedly with the question of what his own form of exposition might be in mind, he observes that, in the field of literature, *irony* expresses the distance of the artist in relation to the affective content of his creation, but in the case of historical creation (which is Gramsci's main theme, and that of his tradition), to give priority to irony would mean following a path which was too literary, and which, furthermore, could be seen in the given conditions as a concession to the scepticism and dilettantism which tend to follow historic disappointments. For this reason, Gramsci considers 'the form of sarcasm' to be preferable in the specific field of historical action, when the intention is that certain ideas or conceptions of the world should ultimately coalesce in the beliefs of majorities. Hence, he also cites as a model certain characteristic texts by Marx, in which the critique and the analysis of the ideological forms of capitalism double up as sarcasm. This sarcasm has a positive sense in relation to popular illusions. It is not any sarcasm, however, but a *passionate sarcasm*, a passionately positive one, in the sense that it is not directed against the most intimate feelings produced by popular illusions, but against the anachronistic form that these illusions sometimes take.⁴³

Even with these caveats, Gramsci shows himself to be wary of any generalisation of sarcasm as a style, that is, of a mechanical conversion of sarcasm into a mere stylistic form; he probably has in mind the times that he has encountered certain abuses of sarcasm as a form during his political activity. He is of the opinion that it would be necessary to focus more closely on the analysis of Marx's passionate sarcasm and to consider it a *transitory* form of expression of historicism (of the various Marxisms) – a form of expression *for the meantime*, so to speak. In a world in which the new is beginning to emerge, and the old has not yet perished, passionate sarcasm would thus be a polemical, transitional form of expression oriented to the formation of a new popular taste and popular language, and its principal goal would be simultaneously to avoid falling into utopianism or 'apodeictic or preaching forms of expression'. Gramsci also adopts a principle of avoiding a preaching tone when engaging in investigations into the history of culture, rather than in artistic criticism properly speaking – that is, in internal criticism. For this reason he rejects the moralistic tendencies in this domain typical of Tolstoy and Shaw.⁴⁴

43 Gramsci 1992b, pp. 117–18 [Q.1, §29] and Gramsci 1975, pp. 2298–301 [Q.26, §5].

44 Gramsci 1996b, p. 123 [Q.3, §151].

Transversalism and Circularity in the Structure of the Notebooks

In the notebooks drafted during the first phase of writing, Gramsci essentially adhered to the thematic schema that he had communicated to Tatiana Schucht in March 1929. He devoted special attention to the history of Italian intellectuals, the study of historical materialism from the point of view of the theory of historiography, and the analysis of Americanism. It seems that this was a reasonable reduction of the 16 themes enumerated on the first page of the first notebook. For if, as Gramsci himself thought in 1927, the proposal to deal 'disinterestedly' with four topics was already an indicator of a certain lack of focus, to tackle 16 would inevitably have obliged him to establish a thematic break as soon as he started to write.

If the headings which occur most frequently in the seven first notebooks are compared with the topics enumerated in February 1929, it can be established that Gramsci started by prioritising four subjects: the study of Italian intellectuals; Father Bresciani's progeny; the reflection on Americanism; and the considerations on the origins and development of Catholic Action. Many entries in the first notebook deal with this last topic, which Gramsci soon broadens with more general considerations on Catholicism in Italy and Europe. He also displays a certain dedication in dealing with types of periodicals, and there is the odd note here and there on the problem of emigration and on the question of language. On the other hand, there are no entries in the first notebooks explicitly dealing with the development of the Italian bourgeoisie, although there are some on the *Risorgimento* (which probably include some considerations that Gramsci had in mind when he established his work plan). In these same notebooks, there are very few allusions to his experiences of life in prison, and the Italian Southern question only appears very occasionally. Although Gramsci devoted a certain amount of time in these two years to the study of languages and to translations, he does not appear to have worked specifically on neogrammarians and neolinguistics. Lastly, the theme of popular literature and considerations on the concept of folklore only begin to appear in some of the notes that he composed in 1930.

The fact that there are many entries in the first notebooks which are included in rubrics with other titles, and that these notes are generally brief (only in exceptional cases do they exceed four or five pages) should not confuse the reader. The majority of them are intended as a bibliographical preparation for the study of the three or four principal themes; an important part of the reflections, even though they have been given their own titles (which differ from those which figure in the initial plan), have a direct relation with the study of the history of intellectuals.

Gramsci did not write in a linear, continuous and analytical manner in order to construct a sociological and political theory of intellectuals; rather he approached the subject from different angles, transversely, establishing analogies, with an oblique view, such that what seems to be a puzzle gradually starts to take shape and theoretical or hypothetical statements begin to be interrelated until they finally constitute a whole. This is what gives the *Prison Notebooks* their peculiar structure. The form of the whole, as far as the theme of intellectuals is concerned, already appears longitudinally when we reach the first page of the eighth notebook, in which Gramsci recapitulates what has gone before and lists the subthemes of his principal topic: the history of Italian intellectuals.⁴⁵ It is then that we discover how the pages dealing with Father Bresciani's progeny or the reflections on Lorianism (in which he critically analyses the mentality of a whole group of Italian intellectuals characterised by the absence of a systematic, critical spirit, by their disdain for scientific activity, by their lack of organicity and by their failure to develop a paedagogical, cultural project) are embedded within this history.⁴⁶

It is precisely the critical study of this type of traditional intellectual which leads Gramsci to advocate the alternative of a new type of intellectual, one who is responsible and productive, who has a civic conscience and who has links to the mass of citizens, and to characterise the political party into which this individual intellectual merges as a 'collective intellectual'. Gramsci calls this new type of intellectual 'organic', not on account of the latter's dependence vis-à-vis the bureaucratic apparatus of the party, as is sometimes claimed, which represents a distortion of Gramsci's thought, but rather in contradistinction to the type of traditional intellectual who tends towards individualism. Furthermore, Gramsci calls the new political party a 'collective intellectual', because in it, the opposition between clergy and laypeople – an opposition which modern political formations inherited from the churches and religious institutions and secularised – tends ideally to disappear. In arriving at this point, Gramsci's survey of intellectuals, which has been above all a historiographical one, acquires a normative character and becomes a sociological and political study, such that his entries on the history and development of intellectuals in the notebooks end up referring back to political theory, and his reflections both broaden the arc of the study and intersect transversely with each other.

Everything would appear to indicate that the subject which caused Gramsci the most headaches in this first phase of writing the notebooks was precisely the first one enumerated in his plan of February 1929: the theory of history and

45 Gramsci 1996b, pp. 231–33 [Q.8]

46 Gramsci 1975, p. 2321 [Q.28]

of historiography. As far as this area was concerned, Gramsci already had a model against which to measure himself critically and polemically: Benedetto Croce. He also had a tradition within which, or in continuity with which, he could locate his own thought: that inaugurated by Karl Marx. With these antecedents, the Gramscian reflection on the theory of history and historiography could immediately have been diverted towards a glossary of the fundamental concepts of historical materialism in dialogue with Croce. However, this is not what happened, because Gramsci was not one to engage in the mechanical repetition of the concepts of his own tradition. He was interested in engaging with the Marxist conception of the world in its own history and in comparatively applying to it the same historiographical concepts which it itself had applied to the criticism of other ideologies. This is the reason why another critical dialogue, which Gramsci begins in Notebook 4 with Nikolai Bukharin, is superimposed on top of the dialogue with Croce.⁴⁷

On the other hand, in the first notebooks there are some annotations of a methodological character and some stylistic ones which suggest that, on this point, Gramsci was tentatively exploring which form to adopt when writing so as to re-establish the historicist point of view. In this exploration he initially encounters some of the suggestions of the *Ricordi* of Francesco Guicciardini, the father of modern history, that strike him as stylistically and methodologically interesting, but he soon discovers that the work of Machiavelli is much more illustrative both historiographically and from the point of view of political theory.⁴⁸ Gramsci's review of the material published on the centenary of Machiavelli's death provides him with the polemical inspiration that he needs in order to tackle the subject and opens up new perspectives for him, above all from the moment in which he establishes a specific rubric, initially of a bibliographical character, devoted to the Italian Renaissance. It is probably on this point that the analogical thought of Gramsci has afforded the best and most enduring results. This is due to the fact that his re-reading of the work of Machiavelli and his discussion of its various historical interpretations gave him a key for the approximation of historiography and political theory. Gramsci's reinterpretation of the work of Machiavelli and discussion of what has historically passed for 'Machiavellianism' suggests to him an extremely interesting re-reading of Marx's work and of the subsequent Marxisms and, in addition, it

47 Gramsci 1996b, pp. 154–5 and pp. 188–9 [Q.4, §13 and §40].

48 Gramsci 1992b, pp. 287–8; Gramsci 2011b, pp. 72–3 and pp. 283–4 [Q.2, §41; Q.6, §86 and Q.8, §84].

provides him with a consistent metaphor for normative political theory: that of the 'Modern Prince'.

The relevance of this formal, analogical thought, which is chronologically constructed in fragments, and on the basis of transversal reflections, is outlined when Gramsci establishes a new rubric for a series of notes which did not appear nominally in the statement of the plan of studies and writings: the notes on philosophy, which soon provide the key for establishing a direct relation between history (in the sense of historiography), politics (in the sense of political theory) and thought (in the Kantian sense of philosophising). On arriving at the last notebooks, in which Gramsci proceeds to reorder many of his previous notes thematically, the reader is struck by the potency of this analogical method. This is something of a paradox, since Gramsci undertook this reordering in 1933 – i.e., after a serious crisis and when he already foresaw that his life was coming to an end, and was physically and psychically diminished by the harshness of prison and by illness.

In any case, Gramsci gives clues here and there in his correspondence, as well as in the notebooks, to the partial modifications that he had begun to introduce vis-à-vis his initial plans. From as early as May 1930, Gramsci establishes a differentiation between thematic domains with some particular annotations explaining various of these alterations. Two of them would be the most substantial: the project of writing an essay on *Inferno*, Canto x in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which would represent a concretisation of point five in the themes enumerated in February 1929; and the establishment of a series dedicated to notes on philosophy, which subsumes and considerably broadens what he initially considered as point 13 (i.e. common sense). In a letter which he wrote to Tatiana in November 1930,⁴⁹ Gramsci still retains the three or four principal themes which he had distilled from the 16 topics from the first page of the first notebook, and he specifies in slightly more detail the subject in which he is currently immersed: the cosmopolitan function of Italian intellectuals in the 18th century. Gramsci states in this letter that he wishes to order the subject historiographically by referring to the Renaissance and to Machiavelli, and considers that something original might emerge from this, something that was missing. In his opinion, the principal difficulty remains obtaining the materials necessary for the composition of such a book, which was to form 'the introduction to a number of monographs', as he put it.

49 Gramsci 2011a, p. 360.

Disruptions, the Definitive Plan and External Suggestions

I stated above that prison cannot properly be considered the 'laboratory' of the notebooks. It is, of course, the place where the majority of them were written, but the notebooks are the result of a tenacious struggle *against prison* and the prison authorities. In his prison cell in Turi de Bari, Gramsci was not allowed simultaneous access to more than three or four books, which meant that he had to use his wits and lodge complaints against the prison rules and regulations in order to carry out his work. Nor did he have all of his notebooks at his disposal in his cell in Turi de Bari at any one time: those that he was not using were stored in the prison depot along with the books in his possession, which obviously meant that they could be checked and consulted by the prison officials. There is evidence in the testimony of Gustavo Trombetti that this was done by one of the doctors who visited Gramsci in prison in Turi.⁵⁰ This was already a cause for concern for Gramsci during his first phase of writing the notebooks, but, predictably, he did not consider it the main disturbance, since he was determined to struggle against 'prisonitis' in all of its facets. It was other disruptive factors which made him realise that he could no longer retain the same concept of will which had inspired him in his youth, and that he would now have to modify his initial plan.

Of these other disruptive factors, three were to have a great importance for the prisoner: his emotional state, politics, and his deteriorating health. I have already referred to Gramsci's emotional disturbances in a certain amount of detail. Here, I would merely like to add a brief testimony as to why, in spite of everything, in spite of the extent to which the lack of intimate communication embittered Gramsci's character, his emotional disturbance is hardly reflected in the drafting of the notebooks. The testimony in question is the final passage of the draft of a letter to Giulia Schucht that Valentino Gerratana found between the pages of Notebook Eight. In it, Gramsci states: 'I don't want to pretend that the reason for this difficulty of mine is only external to me. The fact is that I only know of one way to overcome this condition by myself, which is to take refuge in the pure realm of the abstract intellect, that is, to make my isolation the exclusive form of my existence. I did not want to conceal this aspect of my life any longer'.⁵¹ Thus, as a consequence of this character-forming process,

50 Cf. Francioni 1992, pp. 159 and 186.

51 From a draft of a letter to Giulia from November 1931, in Gramsci 1975, pp. 2436–7. For comparison, see the text of the letter that he wrote to her on 30 November 1931 in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 106–7.

when Gramsci felt that his affective relation was being gradually being reduced to 'pale and conventional crystallised memories of a brief period of time lived together', he allowed himself to be mostly absorbed by the intellectual work of writing the notebooks, and intellectually was highly productive.

On the other hand, the problems that disturbed Gramsci politically can be discerned in the background of some of the notes and considerations that he wrote from 1930 onwards. In July of that year he received a visit in prison by his brother Gennaro, who had been assigned the task of sounding out Gramsci's opinion on the expulsions that had occurred in the Communist Party of Italy. Gennaro informed the prisoner of the situation of the Communist International, the change in direction which was occurring at the time in terms of its strategy, and the disputes within the Italian party. This caused some perplexity on Gramsci's part. It is not known with certainty what his reaction was to the consultation sought by his brother. There are contradictory testimonies on this score. Gennaro Gramsci later gave several accounts of the same meeting. He claimed that his brother Antonio disagreed with the line that the leadership of the Party was following at the time, but told the other leaders the opposite – that is, that Antonio was in agreement with them – in order to avoid any complications arising for the prisoner. It is probable that Gramsci did not want to express his opinion on these matters through this channel, but his disagreement with the strategy of 'social-fascism' is a corroborated fact. There is testimony to this effect from people who were with him in prison in Turi.⁵² Furthermore, in November 1930, he organised a series of conversations and political debates with his prison comrades during exercise time in which he set out his opinions; this led at first to conflicts with the majority of them, and then, as a consequence, to his greater isolation.⁵³

There are no explicit references to these differences of opinion in the notebooks, but, in the current state of Gramscian scholarship, at least two things can be ascertained. Firstly, Gramsci's preoccupation with strictly political affairs grew as a result of the discussions that he had in prison in Turi at the end

52 According to Athos Lisa, Gramsci was of the opinion that the Communist Party ought to issue the call for a Constituent Assembly before the other parties did, although not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to promote an *entente* with the other anti-fascist forces, to guarantee the communist initiative, to formulate the economic demands with which the workers most identified, and to promote the political education of the southern peasants. Cf. Lisa, 1973.

53 Gerratana's conclusion on this matter is as follows: 'It does not seem that the work on the notebooks suffered in any way due to this situation of isolation, although some episodes related to this were a factor in compounding the psychological tensions which were already afflicting the prisoner in Turi'.

of 1930, which is something that can be gleaned from the notes and reflections on philosophy and political theory which he wrote from that date on. Secondly, there is an appreciable, if indirect, relation between Gramsci's political disagreement with the leadership of the party and the notes that he began to write, from that moment on, on the 'molecular work' that the subaltern classes have to carry out before they can conquer political hegemony. In general outline, these two circumstances can be verified through an attentive reading of some of the reflections that Gramsci makes in Notebooks Six and Seven, especially those included under the headings 'Past and present' and 'Political terminology', as well as those entitled 'Transition from the war of manoeuvre ... to the war of position', 'Politics and the art of war', 'Hegemony', 'Force and consensus', 'State and parties', and so forth. However, as the language that he uses in these reflections seems a little cryptic or Aesopic at certain moments, the concrete proof of the link between this political disturbance at the end of 1930 and the evolution of Gramsci's political thought will depend on the precise dating of some of the notes contained in Notebooks Six and Seven.⁵⁴

In any case, what was in practice the definitive plan for the prison notebooks was motivated by the third disruptive factor: the progressive worsening of Gramsci's illnesses. A few hours before suffering a first serious crisis, on 3 August 1931, Gramsci somewhat dramatically described his isolation and how his affective ties were breaking, to the point of making him feel the aridity of a life that was reduced to mere force of will. In that same letter he declares that he no longer has a genuine work and research programme. He then comments that this was inevitable, and he explains the reason, which is one that he has already alluded to in previous letters: when he reaches a certain phase of the intellectual work that he has set himself, he will require access to large libraries. This has already become evident in his work on the history of Italian intellectuals. As if in passing, Gramsci then goes on to reveal another of the thematic links which do not appear explicitly formulated in the notes that he is simultaneously writing in the notebooks, but which already run through them like a red thread: the relation between his study of the history of Italian intellectuals and his desire to go in depth into the concept of the state, always in the context of the historical development of the Italian people. From this letter it is obvious that, immediately before the first crisis, at which point he has already been writing for two years, Gramsci considers that he has to confront yet another obstacle, in addition to his isolation in prison and his emotional disturbances: the intellectual principles that he has gained as a legacy of his university education. This he states as follows: 'the habit of rigorous

54 Cf. Francioni 1992, pp. 101 ff.

philological discipline that I acquired during my university studies has given me perhaps an excessive supply of methodological scruples'.⁵⁵

However, after the crisis of August 1931, during which Gramsci vomited blood for the first time, this preoccupation passed to the background. He felt that he needed to recover physically, to gain time and concentrate mentally in order to be able to carry out the programme that he had set himself. He then reformulated his work plan under the general title of 'Loose notes and jottings for a history of Italian intellectuals' and set himself the task of grouping the individual notes that he had already composed, and arranging them in a series of monographic notebooks. At the beginning of Notebook Eight he enumerates the themes that he intends to deal with in relation to the history of Italian intellectuals, and immediately after this he announces a regrouping of subjects into ten points: 1) Intellectuals; Scholarly issues; 2) Machiavelli; 3) Encyclopaedic notions and cultural topics; 4) Introduction to the study of philosophy and critical notes on a *Popular Manual of Sociology*; 5) History of Catholic Action; Catholic integralists – Jesuits – modernists; 6) A miscellany of various scholarly notes (past and present); 7) The Italian *Risorgimento* (...); 8) Father Bresciani's progeny. Popular literature. (Notes on literature); 9) Lorianism; 10) Notes on journalism.⁵⁶

This can now be said to be Gramsci's definitive plan for composing the notebooks. The notes dealing with Americanism and Fordism remain, probably provisionally, as an appendix in this formulation. The notebooks devoted to translations are not mentioned, and, in fact, the following year (1932), Gramsci abandoned his translation exercises in order to concentrate on the topics that most interested him.

During those months, while he worked on the first four subjects listed in Notebook Eight, Gramsci was able to rely on the inestimable support of the economist Piero Sraffa. The latter often came to the prisoner's aid in legal, administrative and medical matters, and in negotiations with bookshops so that Gramsci could receive the books and journals that he requested from prison. In addition, Sraffa constantly suggested ideas, themes and bibliographical recommendations of the greatest interest. The importance of this intellectual relationship between Gramsci and Sraffa, which Gerratana already emphasised in 1975, only came to light in all its dimensions during the 1990s following the publication of the archives of the economist, including, among other things, his correspondence with Tatiana Schucht.

55 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 52.

56 Gramsci 1996b, p. 233 [Q.8].

From this correspondence we learn that, between 1931 and 1932, Sraffa became Gramsci's privileged interlocutor through the former's letters to Tatiana. It is worth pointing out that Sraffa had been helping Gramsci from the time of the latter's arrest. Sraffa had already opened an account for him at the Sperling and Kupfer bookshop in Milan during the months the latter spent in exile on Ustica, so that he could request newspapers, journals and books. In early 1927, Sraffa helped his friend financially. In October of the same year, Sraffa visited him in the San Vittore prison in Milan, and it was probably from this meeting between them that the idea emerged that Sraffa would be in communication with Tatiana and act as a contact for Gramsci with the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy abroad, notably with Togliatti.⁵⁷ Shortly afterwards, he published a letter in the *Manchester Guardian* in order to raise awareness among British public opinion of Gramsci's conditions in the Fascist jail. During the autumn of 1929 he intervened at Gramsci's request in order to arrange a legal consultation regarding the possibility that the prisoner's sentence might be reviewed. In the summer of 1930, on hearing of Gramsci's suffering due to the fact that Giulia Schucht was not writing to him, he travelled to Moscow in order to meet her and her family in person.

In early 1931, when Sraffa learned that Gramsci was working on his notes on *Inferno*, Canto x, he sent him *Vita di Dante* by Umberto Cosmo, a work which had only very recently appeared, and he arranged for the prisoner to communicate with the Dante scholar, whom Gramsci would subsequently consult in relation to the latter's interpretative schema. When, that same year, Sraffa learned that Giulia was in psychoanalytic treatment, and Gramsci became interested in psychoanalysis, he suggested that Gramsci read one of the books by Freud. In June 1931, knowing that Gramsci was working on historical materialism and the philosophy of praxis, Sraffa sent him various volumes of the French edition of the works of Marx. On learning that Gramsci was practising his English, he arranged for him to receive a summary of the Soviet five-year plan by *The Economist* and issues of *The Labour Monthly* and other publications via the Milan bookshop. When he found out through a letter from Gramsci to Tatiana that his friend's state of mind was a cause for concern, and that the prisoner had even written that he did not have a true programme of studies, he attempted to dissuade him from the excessive scrupulousness of the philologist, and suggested that he perhaps ought to read different kinds of books. Sraffa then announces that Gramsci has been sent *Science at the Crossroad* (in which are compiled the Soviet contributions to the Second Congress of the History of Science and Technology held in London a short time previously).

57 Spriano 1988, pp. 37 ff.

This aroused in Gramsci a certain interest in the history and philosophy of science, and in science as a cultural phenomenon, and in the popularisation of science.⁵⁸

The intellectual relationship between Gramsci and Sraffa became particularly intense during 1932, and Gramsci responded to a proposal agreed by Piero Sraffa with Tatiana Schucht and Palmiro Togliatti in order to provide intellectual incentives to the prisoner and to prevent his spirits from waning due to his physical and psychological afflictions. Sraffa read the letter that Gramsci wrote to Tatiana on 7 September 1931, in which, after saying that he has already written some 50 pages for the essay on intellectuals (which would later be compiled in Notebook 12), and that he will soon send a work on *Inferno*, Canto x, so that it can be relayed to Professor Cosmo, Gramsci finally comments with irony that he is limiting himself to writing on those philological and philosophical subjects of which Heine said that 'they were so boring that I fell asleep, but the boredom was so great that I was then obliged to wake myself up'. In that letter there is an explicit reference to the scientific work of Sraffa and a polemical comparison of academic scruples in their respective fields of investigation. When Sraffa read this, he devised a plan with Tatiana in order to stimulate Gramsci intellectually:

When you write to Nino, you should insist that he send you a kind of review of Croce's book, and that he dedicate at least two pages of his weekly letter not to personal news, but to a summary of his thoughts and work. Remind him that a few months ago he promised to provide an outline of at least 50 pages of his history of intellectuals.⁵⁹

Tatiana invented the pretext that she herself had to write a review of Croce's *Storia d'Europa nel secolo XIX*⁶⁰ for a journal, and asked Gramsci's opinion; on this basis, an interesting exchange of letters occurred in which Gramsci proceeds to expound his opinions on Croce's position in world culture, on the latter's style, on the character of his critique of Marxism, on his ethico-political conception of history and on his idea of freedom (themes which are treated in Notebooks Eight and Ten). Sraffa read these letters, related Gramsci's point of

58 Although brief, Gramsci's notes on this theme are suggestive. They have been evaluated as such by the historian of science Paolo Rossi, and by philosopher Manuel Sacristán. The latter writes: 'Kuhn did not say much more (philosophically) in his academic best-seller, but the academy, which was shaken as if by an earthquake by the work of one of its respectable members, ignores a thinker like Gramsci'. Cf. Sacristán 1985, p. 33.

59 Letter from P. Sraffa to Tatiana Schucht, 21 April 1932.

60 Croce 1965.

view to his 1926 essay on the Southern question, and continued to formulate questions concerning Croce through Tatiana. However, at a certain moment the prison censor drew the conclusion that Gramsci himself was to review Croce's book, and saw this as an attempt to publish his articles abroad; the prisoner, fearing the repercussions that the matter might have on his prison life, did not pursue the matter further, and the plan was foiled.

Meanwhile Sraffa had been giving cues and indicating the way forward with commendable discretion. In January 1932, he brought up the problem of the transcription of Russian names into Italian, which provoked Gramsci to reflect on scientific and pragmatic criteria in this regard. In February and March, Sraffa transmitted his opinion on the problem of anti-Semitism in Italy to Gramsci, which obliged the latter to reconsider his own point of view which he had expressed in a discussion with Tatiana. In April 1932, when Gramsci was working on interpretations of Machiavelli's writings and consulted Sraffa on Machiavelli's economic opinions, Sraffa, with the modesty of the scientist, stated that he knew nothing of this, but suggested that he read William Petty, whose works were a focus of Marx's attention, and which might be interesting for him. In June 1932, Gramsci expressed an interest in Sraffa's main work: the critical edition of the works of David Ricardo. Gramsci asked for his friend's opinion on Ricardo's methodology (in the broad sense) and consulted him on a hypothesis of his as to the philosophical influence of Ricardo on the founders of historical materialism in comparison with the influence exerted by Hegel. Sraffa answered, through Tatiana, that 'it is very difficult to appreciate the philosophical importance of Ricardo, if indeed he has such an importance, because unlike the philosophers of praxis, he never stopped to consider his own thought historically', and that the only cultural element which is to be found in Ricardo proceeds from the natural sciences.

This suggestion, and the receipt of *Science at the Crossroads* might have spurred Gramsci to deepen his reading of the theory and philosophy of the natural and social sciences in relation to historical materialism, but on this point the two men were somewhat at cross-purposes, undoubtedly due to methodological differences – the analytical method of the one and the analogical method of the other – as Gerratana claims. Nonetheless, Sraffa would propose two further extremely interesting readings to Gramsci: a report on the causes of the financial crisis in England inspired by Keynes, and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of Marx which had just been published in Germany.⁶¹

61 For the intellectual relationship between Gramsci and Sraffa I have drawn on Sraffa 1991, pp. xii–lv; Spriano 1988; Nicola Badaloni's, *Gramsci in carcere e il partito*; Badaloni,

Pregate Dio Sempre Di Trovarvi Dove Si Vince . . .

In the two years that passed between Gramsci's announced restructuring of the plan of the notebooks until his transfer to the clinic at Formia on 7 December 1933, he wrote another 10 notebooks. From the spring of 1932 he began to cross out a part of the texts that he had previously written and to transcribe them in a corrected and sometimes expanded form, regrouping them (although not always) in monographic notebooks that he called 'special notebooks'. There is thus a critical difference between miscellaneous notebooks and monographic (or quasi-monographic) or special notebooks. The fact that, from that moment on, there are texts with one draft and others with two distinct drafts, is a complicating factor for any editor of the notebooks.⁶²

After listing the ten areas on which he proposed to work from that point onwards in Notebook Eight, Gramsci set about patiently completing the project. On the one hand, he drafted five monographic or quasi-monographic notebooks: Notebook 10, dealing with Benedetto Croce; Notebook 11, an introduction to the study of philosophy; Notebook 12, on the history of intellectuals; Notebook 13, on Machiavelli's politics; and Notebook 16, which is devoted to cultural themes. He simultaneously reserved several notebooks in order to continue writing miscellaneous entries: Notebook 14, with reflections on popular literature and more notes on Machiavelli; Notebook 15, in which he includes various notes on history and political theory under the heading 'Past and Present', new reflections on Catholic Action and on Americanism and, for the first time, some autobiographical considerations following his second and more serious crisis in March 1933; and Notebook 17, mostly written after this crisis, in which he reviews contemporary journals.⁶³

Thus, between August 1931 and March 1933, Gramsci had completed a part of his new plan, especially the first four points enumerated in Notebook Eight. In addition, he reordered the material for point six ('Past and Present'), and he continued working on the drafting of notes for the other five points and for the appendix dealing with Americanism. In Notebook Eight itself, probably in 1932, he established a new rubric with the title 'The Modern Prince' and here he declares his intention to include all the notes and entries on political

prologue to Gramsci and Sraffa 1986, pp. 7–23; and Potier, 1990. The most detailed study is: Fausti 1998.

62 Gerratana 1997, pp. 17 ff; Francioni 1992, pp. 100 ff.

63 See the description of these notebooks in volume 4 (critical apparatus) of V. Gerratana's edition, Gramsci 1975; see also the conjectures on the internal dating of some of the notes contained in them in the aforementioned works of G. Francioni.

science within it.⁶⁴ Even in the miscellaneous notebooks he gives notice of his intention of a monographic or quasi-monographic reordering and concentration of his notes. Thus, for example, the heading 'Machiavelli' no longer refers exclusively to the interpretation of the works of Niccolò Machiavelli and their implications, but takes on a more general sense: that of political questions in general.

Deserving of special mention is the rubric 'Past and Present', which Gramsci restructured in the miscellaneous Notebook 14 in order to accommodate all those notes and entries which did not have a concrete historical significance, or which referred to particular facts. Under this heading, Gramsci now excludes reflections and considerations of a properly historiographical character and introduces others which in reality deal with socio-political or socio-historical questions, but which have a relevance for the present. In justifying this change, Gramsci once again refers to the model of Francesco Guicciardini's *Ricordi politici e civili* and states that, in generalising or universalising from particular facts, there is a movement from the anecdotal to the categorical, since such a universalisation is all-encompassing in stylistic or theoretical terms – that is, as the search for truth.⁶⁵ Here, Gramsci reveals the methodological importance of the allusion that he had made to the *Ricordi* when he began writing the notebooks. 'Before assembling the remarks under this rubric' – writes Gramsci in a stylistic and methodological note – 'reread Francesco Guicciardini's *Ricordi politici e civili*'. He goes on to say of the latter that they contain moral considerations of a sarcastic bent and that they are very apposite. He also gives an example: 'Pray to God that you will always be on the winning side, for you will get credit even for things in which you had no part. If, on the contrary, you are a loser, you will be blamed for an infinite number of things of which you are entirely innocent'.⁶⁶

This quotation from Guicciardini, which Gramsci transcribed at a time when he still maintained his good humour, undoubtedly had a double sense: on the one hand, it indicated what Gramsci proposed to do under the rubric of 'Past and Present' (he was someone who, like Guicciardini, had participated actively in political life and aimed to preserve historical memory), and on the other, it allowed him to ironise about those who, like himself, precisely did *not* find themselves in the party of the victors. Gramsci subsequently realised that this type of sarcasm could have negative practical consequences – namely, that it could foster a pessimism of the will – and he revised his opinion as to Guicciardini's stylistic power. Nonetheless, he continued to draw inspiration

64 Gramsci 2011b, p. 246 [Q.8, §21].

65 Gramsci 1975, p. 1745 [Q.14, §78]. Even more explicitly: Gramsci 1975, p. 1776. [Q.15, §19].

66 Gramsci 1996b, p. 116 [Q.3, §139].

from Guicciardini's general intention, since, in fact, in the *Ricordi*, the historian and diplomat derives maxims of an ethico-political character from his memories. Hence, we can conclude that, from the outset, Gramsci had a paedagogical and political intention in writing the notes on 'Past and Present' different to that suggested by the rubric, and unquestionably very different to what its inclusion in brackets under 'Miscellaneous notes' in the 1931 plan (undoubtedly in order to throw the censors off his scent) would lead us to suppose.

Between Prometheus and Job

Discounting the possibility that the reference to 'notes of varying erudition' should be understood as another joke on Gramsci's part, which is highly unlikely given the date, everything indicates that when he wrote this note in Notebook 14, he was in a hurry to complete point six of his plan, because time was becoming a 'pseudonym for life itself' for him, and, at this point, he wanted to clarify his intentions in the reflections which he had included under the heading of 'Past and Present'. If, from this declaration in Notebook 14, the reader returns to the entries Gramsci included under this heading in Notebooks Six and Seven, it will be seen that they concur thematically with many others grouped under the rubric of 'Encyclopaedic notions', and that their background is almost always one of political philosophy or political theory. Flowing through most of these entries is a discourse which emerges in the notebooks on the strategy of revolution to be followed in the West, once the dimension of the defeat in the 1920s has been acknowledged. The rubric 'Past and Present' relocates the reader in the historical context of the *Prison Notebooks*. This context is the defeat of the socialist revolution in Western Europe, and the tragedy of the revolutionaries without a revolution. In spite of this, Gramsci continued writing serenely and patiently under this rubric, and those of 'The Modern Prince' and 'Machiavelli' (which were expanded in the manner outlined above), almost until the end of his life. It is under this heading that he writes about those who have been the 'fertiliser of history' and cannot accept that, in the new circumstances, they simply have to be 'fertiliser' so that others can plough; and, in relation to this, he also writes about the consequences of the crisis of 1929, about domination and consent, about balances of forces, about how to understand the passage from the war of manoeuvre to the war of position on the political level, and on the relation between this latter and passive revolutions.⁶⁷ The use of the

67 On the dimension accorded by Gramsci to his reflection on Machiavelli and Machiavellianism, I direct readers to the chapter on 'The Ethico-Political Project of

word 'patiently' here is entirely deliberate, since 'patience' and its corresponding adverb are two of the terms which feature most in Gramsci's last writings, both in his letters and in the notebooks, both when he is reflecting on alternative political action and when, already seriously ill, he is thinking about himself. Not long after establishing the definitive plan for the notebooks, and in the same context in which he writes that, without giving up on ploughing the fields, it is necessary to accustom oneself to being the 'fertiliser of history', Gramsci curiously upholds Job, comparing him with Prometheus, the lay saint *par excellence* of revolutionaries.⁶⁸ The simile sums up better than a lengthy discourse the lived experience of the revolutionary without a revolution.

1933 was a horrible year for Gramsci. From January until the summer he felt that his energies were coming to an end: 'Please do remember what I told you in January [...] and, if you still have them handy, reread the letters I wrote to you after that. In this way you will be able to understand that this is not a sudden whim of mine, but the terminal phase of a long process [...] I am immensely tired'. Then, in the same letter, to Tatiana: 'I feel detached from everything and everyone [...] I am emptied out. I experienced my last attempt at life [...] in January [...] Now there is no longer anything to be done. Believe me, if at some other time in life you have an experience like the one that you've had with me, *time is the most important thing; it is simply a pseudonym for life itself*'.⁶⁹

However, even after the second and more serious attack that he suffered in March 1933, Gramsci still continued writing in his cell in prison in Turi during the days or hours that he could mentally bear the suffering, once he had regained the use of his hands. It is only at this point that an autobiographical note finds its way into the notebooks: in Notebook 17, he states that he has begun to judge 'catastrophes of character' with a greater indulgence and relates this to a reflection in a letter of his to Tatiana Schucht on the 'molecular transformations' that occur in people in extreme situations.⁷⁰ In this passage, Gramsci calls attention to something which usually passes unnoticed or to which we hardly give any importance: the *gradual* transformation of people who do not stop being what they once were all of a sudden, as in the case of the political defector or the intellectual chameleon, but little by little, through a molecular modification of their whole being, during which process they

Antonio Gramsci' in this volume. On the centrality that the concept of passive revolution takes on in the notebooks, see Buci-Glucksmann 1975, and the contributions dedicated to the topic in Ferri and Fubini (eds.), 1977.

68 Gramsci 1975, p. 1128 [Q.9, §53]. On this theme, see also Medici 2000.

69 Letter to Tatiana Schucht, July 2, 1933, in Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, pp. 302–6.

70 Gramsci 1975, pp. 1762–4 [Q.15, §9].

observe and fear the change which is happening within them, as if from the outside. It is undoubtedly Gramsci's preoccupation with the molecular transformation occurring within himself that prompts him, a little later, and seemingly out of the blue, to embrace the wisdom attributed to the Zulus by an English journal of the time: 'It is better to advance and die than to stop moving and die'.⁷¹

In the Beginning Was Language; At the End, Too

Gramsci did not stop. When he was informed, in November 1933, that he was to leave the Turi prison in order to be transferred to a clinic in Civitavecchia, he took with him all the notebooks that he had written. On 7 December, he arrived at Formia from Civitavecchia, in order to be admitted to a clinic there. This marked the beginning of Gramsci's third and final phase (1934–5) of writing the notebooks. In Formia, his health did not improve. From what we know from the correspondence between Tatiana Schucht and Piero Sraffa, during the first four months of his stay in Formia, he could hardly write.⁷² Even so, in the following months he still wrote another 12 notebooks there. Most of them were left incomplete, and, in some of them, he only wrote a few pages. During the moments in which his afflictions permitted it, he was able to work with several notebooks at a time, and could thus recover his reflections of previous periods and add new notes, which he sometimes inserted in the blank spaces that he had left in other notebooks (this, incidentally, is what makes it very difficult to reproduce the actual chronological sequence of the notes).

All the notebooks written in Formia are 'special' notebooks, that is, they are divided according to the regrouping of subjects that he had established at the end of 1931. In 1934, Gramsci had finished the notes on Machiavelli (Notebook 18), the majority of the notes on Humanism and the Renaissance (Notebook 17), and also the majority of notes dealing with the *Risorgimento* (Notebook 19), and Americanism and Fordism (Notebook 22).⁷³ In addition, he subsequently compiled and rewrote the notes on Catholic Action and related topics,⁷⁴ those on popular culture and on literary criticism and journalism, as well as adding

71 Gramsci 1975, p. 1769 [Q.15, §12].

72 Letter from Tatiana Schucht to Piero Sraffa, in Sraffa 1991, pp. 159 and 165.

73 See the analysis and evaluation in Baratta and Cantone, 1989.

74 La Rocca focuses on this part of Gramsci's work in his introduction to the anthology of Gramsci that he edited, *La religione come senso comune* (Gramsci 1997); see also Díaz Salazar 1989–90.

others dealing with subaltern social groups⁷⁵ and Lorianism. During this period, he generally restricted himself to more or less mechanically transcribing his notes.

Gramsci continued to reflect on the role of intellectuals almost throughout the entire process of writing the notebooks. In 1935, under the heading 'Lorianism' (Notebook 28), he wrote 18 pages in which he compiled previous notes about the negative aspects of the mentality of some influential Italian intellectuals and on their effects on national culture; in the course of transcribing these notes, he relates the existence of these traits both in Italy and elsewhere to the rise of Hitlerism, which he characterises as 'a monstrous Lorianism which has broken the official mould and been propagated as the conception and scientific method of a new official order'. This passage recalls his own socio-cultural depiction of the rise of fascism in Italy between 1921 and 1923, except that Gramsci now generalises as follows: 'The German "culture" dominated by Hitlerism has demonstrated the fragility of modern civilisation in all of its contradictory expressions'.⁷⁶ Once again, moral disorder is presented as a consequence of the intellectual disorder produced by the collapse of civilisation.⁷⁷

It is worth underlining the fact that the last notebook, number 29, which was probably written in the first months of 1935 (when Gramsci was already on parole and, in any case, before he was admitted to the Quisisana clinic in Rome), contains 10 pages devoted to an introduction to the study of grammar. This fact is of interest, because it has an almost symbolic value: the circle is closed. Here Gramsci turns his attention to subjects which had been a principal area of interest for him during his university studies: language, normative grammar, and cultural politics.⁷⁸

In these ten pages, Gramsci maintains that written normative grammar has always been an arbitrary matter, the result of a specific cultural orientation, and, as such, an act of national-cultural politics, a political act. Here he poses himself the question as to the type of political act that this represents, and asks whether the centralising orientation tending towards the creation of a common national language (which is related to the struggle to eradicate illiteracy) must always elicit particularist oppositions and resistances. He counterposes the resistance of the masses who are unwilling to relinquish their particularist habits and mindsets to the 'stupid resistance fostered by the fanatics of

75 The Gramscian category of subalternity is studied in Buttigieg 1999.

76 Gramsci 1975, pp. 2325–6 [Q.28, §1].

77 Gramsci 1975, pp. 2331–2 [Q.28, §11].

78 This point is emphasised by De Mauro 1999, pp. 68–79.

international languages'.⁷⁹ He then observes that the process of the formation, propagation and development of a unitary national language occurs through a whole complex of molecular processes, and that, for this reason, it is worth attempting to gain an understanding of the process as a whole, in order to be able to intervene in it with full knowledge of the facts. He adds the qualification that it should not be thought that interventionism is always 'decisive' (in the sense of achieving given objectives once and for all), nor that a specific unitary language will be generated in all cases, given that this will only be brought about if the need for it is really felt. In his opinion, what intervention does is to accelerate the already existing process. If intervention is rational, it will be organically linked to tradition, which has an importance in the cultural economy.

These reflections occurred to Gramsci at a time in which the idea of retiring definitively to Sardinia was ripening in his mind. Gramsci knew that his time was coming to an end. In his correspondence of the last few months, the lucidity with which he sees his situation is poignant. In the summer of 1936, this lucidity causes him to write the following words: 'What I intend to say when I think that my retirement to Sardinia (which I nevertheless sense would and could be of benefit to my health) would be the beginning of a new cycle of my life is in fact the expression of a well thought out analysis, which takes into account the given conditions, where my situation would be one of complete isolation, of intellectual degradation more accentuated than the present one, and a nullification, or almost, of certain forms of expectation that during these years, though they tormented me, have also given a certain content to my life'.⁸⁰

It is now known that a few weeks before the end, Gramsci changed his mind. Even though he loved his native Sardinia, he would ultimately have preferred to die in the Soviet Union, with Giulia and his sons, Delio and Giuliano.

79 Gramsci 1985b, p. 182 [Q.29, §2].

80 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 2, p. 362.

Language and Politics in Gramsci^{1†}

The whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilisations.²

Antonio Gramsci's preoccupation with the theme of language [*lengua*] and linguistic problems is ever present from his early writings right up to the last notes of the *Prison Notebooks*, drafted in 1935, and his last letters. This preoccupation is as sufficiently documented in relation to the period of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, as it is in the case of the *Quaderni del carcere* and the *Lettere dal carcere*.

Some interpreters of his work, such as Franco lo Piparo and, more recently, Tullio de Mauro, have at different moments emphasised the importance of Gramsci's education at the University of Turin as a linguist and philologist for the elaboration of his work as a whole and for the configuration of his philosophical and political thought. Valentino Gerratana himself has endorsed the consideration that Gramsci's historical and philological reflections, and in particular his conception of language [*lenguaje*] as an activity which shapes feelings and collective beliefs in some cases and social schisms in others, had a decisive importance not only for the elaboration of a theory of culture based on the idea of moral and intellectual reform, but also for the formation of the theory of hegemony, which is at the centre of the political philosophy of the mature Gramsci.

I consider that, in our time, it is worth emphasising once more this aspect of Gramsci's work. More concretely, his intention of constructing a new political and theoretical language [*lenguaje*], his desire for a communication in the

^{1†} The title of this chapter in the original is 'Lengua, lenguaje y política en Gramsci'. Both *lengua* and *lenguaje* (corresponding to *lingua* and *linguaggio* respectively in Italian) are translated into English as 'language'. Whereas *lengua* denotes language in the sense of particular languages such as Italian, Sardinian, Russian, and so on, etc., *lenguaje* signifies either a) the human faculty of language in general (in all its socio-historical and cultural determinacy, it might be added, in keeping with a Gramscian or Marxian perspective) or b) language in the sense of particular linguistic registers (such as educated language, political language, or popular language. Given this ambiguity of meaning in English, I give the Spanish original in square brackets after each occurrence of these terms in the chapter itself.

² Gramsci 1971, p. 450 [Q.11, §28].

framework of a specific shared liberatory tradition beyond the jargon of the specialist and beyond established formulae.

I think this for two reasons. In the first place, because it seems to me that Gramsci is, of all the classical Marxist thinkers, the one who resonates most with people in the different countries of the world, the one who has the most things to say to us; this is due not only to what he said and wrote, but also how he said it, or the form in which he said it.

Secondly, because the search for an adequate language [*lenguaje*] in which to maintain a dialogue between generations in the framework of a common emancipatory tradition is perhaps the principal *pre-political* task for the Left which is worthy of the name as we begin a new century. The struggle over how to give sense to the words of one's own tradition, the struggle over naming, giving things a name, is probably the first autonomous act of the battle of ideas at the turn of the century. In this regard, the Marxist socialist tradition finds itself in a similar situation to that alluded to by Girolamo Savonarola when, in a previous *fin de siècle* moment, at the origins of European modernity, and in the face of the degeneration of official Christianity, he proposed that the keywords of his tradition should not in fact be jettisoned. Instead, they should continue to be used as the majority did habitually, but with a recovery of the precise sense of the concepts that had been preserved only by a minority.³

In saying this, I do not of course intend to approximate the secular communism of Antonio Gramsci (who, in his secularism, learned much from Machiavelli's criticism of the friar) to the Christian prophecies of Savonarola, since the analogy would immediately entail an anachronism. The intention here is to call attention to what can be considered a similar attitude, at the beginning and at the end of modernity, to the relevance that language [*lenguaje*] has for attempts to re-establish conceptions of the world that can coalesce in traditions of human liberation.

Gramsci himself wrote a suggestive reflection along these lines concerning language [*lenguaje*] and metaphors in relation to the founders of the philosophy of praxis. In this context,⁴ he states that language [*lenguaje*] is always metaphorical; and, although it is important not to exaggerate the meaning of the term 'metaphor' by claiming that all discourse is necessarily metaphorical, it can nevertheless be said that contemporary language [*lenguaje*] is metaphorical 'with respect to the meanings and the ideological content which the words had in preceding periods of civilisation'.⁵ This observation by Gramsci

3 I refer to this in Fernández Buey 2000.

4 Gramsci 1971, pp. 449–52 [Q.11, §24].

5 Gramsci 1971, p. 450 [Q.11, §28].

is also valid for certain terms of the philosophy of praxis, such as 'civil society', 'ideology', or 'hegemony' (not to mention 'socialism' or 'material democracy'), which have already entered into the habitual language [*lenguaje*] of contemporary social sciences and educated citizens. There is no doubt that various of these words were used by Gramsci in a slightly different sense to that which they had in Marx's work. The clearest case is that of the term 'ideology', which was almost always employed by Marx in a pejorative sense to mean 'false consciousness', and which Gramsci uses most often in a neutral or positive sense to denote an articulated *ensemble* of ideas. From the Marxian use of the term it follows that, in the struggle for their liberation, people should aspire to the overcoming of ideologies, or to the end of ideologies (to use an expression often repeated subsequently by those at the opposite end of the political spectrum); the Gramscian use of the term, on the other hand, implies that what should be aspired to is ideology which is consciously articulated, so that mere common sense can be overcome and transformed into *enlightened* common sense.⁶

Nor can there be any doubt that, in passing down to contemporary discourse and even to the manuals of political sociology, some of these terms have changed their meaning today. This is the case with the term 'ideology': given the spread of the ideology of the end of ideologies (since Daniel Bell advanced such a thesis), it seems that an important part of the left wants to defend the persistence of ideologies (without further qualification), thus abandoning Marx's markedly anti-ideological project. However, it is also the case with the expression 'civil society', which has acquired so many and such varied connotations in customary political and sociological language [*lenguaje*] that it is impossible to avoid feeling a certain unease upon hearing or reading these falsely attributed to Gramsci.

The problem lies in knowing what is to be done on the basis of such an observation, and how to proceed when the trivialisation of words ends up doing violence to the concepts involved. Gramsci rejected two alternative approaches of his time which had been widely promoted historically: the utopia of fixed and universal languages [*lenguas*], and the pragmatic, Paretian tendency to theorise abstractly about language [*lenguaje*] as the cause of error in order to solve the concrete problem of the ambivalence of everyday language [*lenguaje*] and the different uses which 'simple' people and 'educated' intellectuals make of words. Such an approach would imply an appropriate 'dictionary' or the creation of a pure (formal or mathematical) language [*lenguaje*] of universal use.

6 Manuel Sacristán emphasises this difference throughout his work on Gramsci's writings.

Independently of what one might think about the epistemological merits of Pareto's and Russell's attempts to find a language [*lenguaje*] in which each term is used univocally, and independently too of what one might think about the (more recent) extension of such attempts to the field of political science, it seems evident that such a pretension, however well-meaning, is beyond the ambit of concrete collective political activity and thus that, in such activity, it is necessary to come to terms with the impossibility of overcoming amphiboly, equivocation and metaphor. This, at least, was Gramsci's point of view. What this implies, then, is the search for a language [*lenguaje*] which is not formal or formalised, and which is also in a certain sense metaphorical, in which intellectuals and the popular masses, as well as the various generations, can understand each other in the struggle for a new culture.

To put it another way: in order to be able to renew the Marxist and socialist tradition in these new times, a considerable effort is required in terms of the communication and reciprocal comprehension of lived experiences between generations, an innovative linguistic effort similar to that undertaken by Gramsci himself, first in the *L'Ordine Nuovo* years, and then during the years he spent in prison. This effort on the part of Gramsci can be characterised as a formally and methodologically innovative initiative both in terms of his presentation of one of the traditions of the workers' movement (the Marxist one) and, consequently, in the very way that he interprets Marx's work. Gramsci's initiative is also substantively innovative insofar as it is informed by his own thought, which addresses new socio-economic and cultural problems which were not dealt with, or not anticipated by, the principal classical writers of the tradition, even though he considers himself to be in continuity with this tradition.

The form which Gramsci gives his discourse, and the language [*lenguaje*] which he invents in order to interpret Marx and to think in continuity with him, but in an innovative way, is above all markedly *dialogical*. This point is worth emphasising here. Gramsci's form is not the tendentially 'architectonic', dialectical form which Marx seeks in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (and to which he alludes in his correspondence with Lassalle on the subject of the first volume of *Capital*); nor is it the form of a 'system', such as that outlined by Engels in *Anti-Dühring* and in his theory of the transition from utopian to scientific socialism; nor is it the 'treatise' form favoured by Bukharin; nor is it the almost always politically instrumental form adopted by Lenin in the majority of his works; nor indeed is it the 'essay' form which became prevalent in a good part of subsequent 'theoretical' Marxism. The form of Gramsci's discourse is more of a simultaneous or transtemporal dialogue in three directions: with the classical writers of the tradition (precisely in order

to specify the innovations made by these, and to clarify why the philosophy of praxis is an autonomous philosophy); with his closest contemporaries (in order to take decisions, if indeed such are at all possible, on the concerns and problems of the moment – it is in this sense that the polemics with Bukharin, and, more circumstantially, with Trotsky, are to be understood); and, finally, a dialogue with himself, but without becoming self-absorbed, on the basis of his reconsideration of the experiences he has had since 1917 (and it is in this sense that some of the notes under the rubric of ‘Past and Present’ which traverse the *Prison Notebooks* can be read).

The importance which Gramsci accorded to language [*lingua*] and the linguistic form of expression [*linguaje*] throughout his life can be studied in various different contexts. Here, I will refer principally to three of these contexts with special attention to what the *Prison Notebooks* contain in this regard.

The first context to be taken into account is, naturally, that of Gramsci’s specific theoretical considerations on languages [*linguas*] and their history, on grammar, on problems of linguistics, and on Italian culture and literature in connection with these problems.

As has been pointed out, these reflections on language [*lingua*] already figure prominently in Gramsci’s first work plan in prison in March 1927 when he announces, with a certain sense of irony, that he wants to do something *für ewig*, disinterestedly, and in accordance with the conception of Goethe’s as it was recast by Pascoli. This is not only because the second topic in this plan is ‘nothing less’ than a study of comparative linguistics, but also because the other proposed themes (the investigations into the formation of a public spirit in the Italy of the nineteenth century, the transformation of taste in theatre on the basis of Pirandello’s work and the formation of popular taste in literature) all have a direct connection with philological preoccupations.

Although this initial plan was to undergo notable modifications in the subsequent years for various reasons, and although Gramsci declared at a certain moment in time that he no longer had a plan of systematic study to speak of, still his determination to ‘squeeze juice from a dried fig’ undoubtedly allowed him to salvage at least a part of his ‘disinterested’ project. Illness, the lack of access to appropriate scientific or academic resources in prison, political and emotional problems, and the constant effort of introspection which he undertook in the following years eventually persuaded him that what he could realistically do in such a situation was to write a *substantially polemical* work. In his exercises in introspection, Gramsci ultimately combined the Socratic ‘know thyself’ with an approach which consisted in making a virtue out of necessity, and which he justified in terms of what could realistically be achieved in those conditions:

[M]y entire intellectual formation has been of a polemical order; even thinking 'disinterestedly' is difficult for me, that is, studying for study's sake. Only occasionally, but rarely, does it happen that I lose myself in a specific order of reflections and find, so to speak, in the things themselves enough interest to devote myself to their analysis. Ordinarily, I need to set out from a dialogical or dialectical standpoint, otherwise I don't experience any intellectual stimulation... I don't like to cast stones into the darkness; I want to feel a concrete interlocutor or adversary; in my family relations too I wish to carry on dialogues...⁷

However, the final realisation of the project, from what we can observe in the *Quaderni del carcere*, turned out to be something more than mere polemic. It certainly yielded more than a mosaic of fragmentary reflections, as is sometimes too hastily said. Many of his notes had more substance than mere polemic – for example, those on the mobility and stratification of language [*lingua*], on the tension between living and normative grammar, on the relation between expressive or stylistic options and the forms of culture and social life, or on the translatability of linguistic registers [*linguajes*] and cultural formations. Running through all these notes is a kind of red thread, which is the question of a new culture of the subaltern classes and the struggle for hegemony; this is a red thread which immediately transcends the polemical form and the fragmentary nature of the notes.

In relation to this point, it can be said that Gramsci's project takes shape in a certain sense through the combination of his academic training as a philologist and historian of language [*lingua*] with his experience as a communist political leader, which enables him to apply the insights thus gained to the study of Italian history and to cultural criticism. As we know, in his first years in prison, both in Milan and above all in Turi de Bari, Gramsci devoted many hours to the study of foreign grammars (German, Russian and English) and to translation exercises. For a certain period, namely from 1929 to 1932, he combined this activity with writing his notebooks. He was interested in Italian grammar until the end of his life. Thanks to research by Renzo Martinelli it is known, for example, that Gramsci wrote criticisms in the margins of his copy of Alfredo Panzini's *Guida alla grammatica italiana*, and that these are related to what was to be his final entry in the notebooks – the notes for an introduction to the study of grammar.

If the *Quaderni del carcere* are viewed as a whole, what results from this combination of Gramsci's academic expertise as a philologist with his acquired

7 Gramsci 2011a, vol. 1, p. 369.

political experience is an outline of a *contemporary political sociology*. Granted, this is a sociology or a socio-politics with an explicit point of view and with an acute consciousness of history. His initial historico-critical considerations on the question of language [*lingua*] and classes of intellectuals, or on the various types of grammar, ultimately give way to considerations of linguistic politics, cultural politics, contemporary sociology – in short, to considerations on the reorganisation of cultural hegemony in his time. In his marginal notes to Panzini's *Guida*, Gramsci already asks for whom the grammar is written, and whether the author expresses a real historical movement or an arbitrary individualism. The question, then, is whether grammar is really generated by the educated stratum of the population which, in its speech and writing, has been formed and united precisely in accordance with a grammar, or whether it is the result of a decision to present an abstract model of language [*lingua*], separate from the writers and the use of this language [*lingua*]. In his criticism of 'grammatical *divismo*',^{8†} which attempts to dictate laws to spontaneous 'grammar', Gramsci establishes a simile which recurs throughout his work: wherever there is *divismo*, in grammar as in politics, there is no 'direction-giving organic centre'. He then proceeds to make a characteristic analogical leap: 'Hollywood is not Paris, because the USA is not old France'.

However, where this socio-historical point of Gramsci's is best expressed is in Notebook 29. Here he writes:

Every time that the question of language [*lingua*] surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the ruling class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize cultural hegemony. Today we have witnessed various phenomena which indicate a rebirth of these questions...⁹

In addition, then, to observing that the preoccupation with language [*lingua*], types of language [*linguaje*], and literature in their relation to hegemony is present both at the beginning of Gramsci's work plan in prison (in the first notebook written during 1929) and at its end (in the 'Notes for an Introduction to the Study of Grammar', written in 1935), it is clear that these kinds of Gramscian considerations are still of much relevance today, particularly in

8† *Divismo* can refer variously to the Hollywood star-system; to behaviour characteristic of a *diva*; or to mass fanaticism or hero worship.

9 Gramsci 1985b, pp. 183–4 [Q.29, §3]. [Translation modified – N.G.].

countries such as ours,¹⁰ where the question of language [*lengua*] (or better, that of languages [*lenguas*] and their dialectal forms, and of the encounters and clashes between cultures) has long since become one of the main themes of public debate. In this point as well, Gramsci's principal contribution is of a methodological order. Methodology is to be understood here in its broad, philosophical sense.

Without turning this pre-political matter into an instrumentally political one (as has often occurred in the controversies of recent times around languages [*lenguas*] and cultures), Gramsci had an astute grasp of the political and politico-cultural dimension which is hidden, or is not always declared, in any project of linguistic normalisation (when the question of language [*lengua*] surfaces once again), starting with the different variants of normative grammar. In the current epoch, which is one of multiculturalism, but which is also characterised by globalisation and the resurgence of nationalisms and particularisms, we can verify on a daily basis the extent to which what is at stake in polemics which are ostensibly of a linguistic, philological, socio-linguistic or cultural-anthropological nature, is also a struggle for (cultural, economic and political) hegemony. This struggle for hegemony is played out between the various regionally differentiated factions of the national bourgeoisies, between the various bourgeoisies of plurinational and plurilinguistic states, and between the bourgeoisies and middle strata of composite states with significant linguistic and/or dialectal variants.

In this sense, then, it seems to me that a comparison between Gramsci's shrewd notes on 'Americanism' on the one hand, and his considerations on the political background to the historical projects of linguistic normativity, or his observations on the national-popular dimension on the other, can still significantly aid the rational comprehension of what is occurring in the European geographical context. These developments are not exactly promising. It could even be said that the pendulum of history has changed direction: while Gramsci evolved from a youthful autonomism towards a position where he provided the foundations for a national-popular politics along internationalist lines, but with a respect for differences, today, by contrast, the direction of travel is towards an identification of national-popular politics with autonomism (in its various political shapes, whether regionalist, nationalist, or pro-independence, etc.), partly as a reaction to globalisation and the cultural uniformisation implied by it. In order to comprehend this change, an instructive comparison can be made between the direction in which events

10† That is, in multi-lingual countries such as Spain or Italy.

are pointing in present-day Europe and Gramsci's forecast for the development of European culture:

There is today [around 1930] a European cultural consciousness, and there exists a long list of public statements by intellectuals and politicians who maintain that a European union is necessary. It is fair to say that the course of history is heading towards this union and that there are many material forces that will only be able to develop within this union. If this union were to come into existence in *x* years, the word 'nationalism' will have the same archaeological value as 'municipalism' has today.¹¹

The second area of relevance here is that of Gramsci's considerations on languages [*lenguas*] as vehicles of communication in his correspondence with Giulia and Tania Schucht and with other family members. Here, Gramsci insists on a number of occasions on the importance of teaching children in their own mother tongue, and in the case of his relatives from Sardinia, he puts forwards a number of arguments aimed at overcoming the islanders' complex vis-à-vis the Italian language [*lengua*], emphasising that Sardinian is not a dialect, but rather a language [*lengua*] in its own right, and that, in time, in years to come, the children will appreciate having been educated in it, because it will not represent any handicap in terms of developing a knowledge of Italian. This was his own experience, and he uses it in his argument by generalising from it. On the other hand, it can be said that the problem of language [*lengua*] and modes of expression almost became obsessive for Gramsci in his communication with Giulia Schucht, and occasionally with Tatiana, too. This obsession had two dimensions: firstly, a private and affective one, related precisely to the effort that he himself was making in order to have a 'true correspondence', an 'authentic dialogue' with Giulia (given that these were two people who loved each other but who did not always understand each other); secondly, a public, socio-political one, which is connected to the public use of languages [*lenguas*].

In writing on this theme, it should be remembered that we are dealing with an intimate relationship between an Italian who had difficulties in reading and properly understanding the Russian language [*lengua*], and a Russian who had studied in Italy, but who expressed herself with a certain hesitancy when writing in Italian. Communication between two such people would be hard enough in itself in normal circumstances; however, these difficulties were compounded by the distance between them (he being in Italy and she in

11 Gramsci 1996b, p. 8 [Q.6, §78]. Cf. also Gramsci 2011b, pp. 60–1 [Q.3, §2].

Moscow), by their respective illnesses (both physical and psychological in both cases), and by his imprisonment (which prevented them from talking or writing openly and frankly about any of the things which were important to them, such as their feelings or politics). In such conditions, Gramsci's repeated insistence that it was vitally important for him that she express herself with clarity and precision in her letters is understandable, as is his occasional irritation at Tania's intermediation, for all that this was well-intentioned. Furthermore, we can have an understanding, to some extent at least, of the obsession which led him to read and re-read time and again the same letter in order to glean all the nuances contained in a single piece of information or a statement afforded by 'Iulca'.

Gramsci's obsession with the language [*lenguaje*] of interpersonal communication, which was so patent in his correspondence, would become nothing short of neurotic at certain moments of his life in prison. It is not possible for two people who have children together to maintain a long-distance relationship with the philological punctiliousness, and on occasion the pedantry, which Gramsci manifested in some of his letters. He was himself conscious of this on some occasions and duly apologised. In any case, this punctiliousness must count as one of the factors explaining Gramsci's tragedy in prison, and that of 'Iulca' in Moscow.

As the matter is delicate and demands sensitivity in its treatment, I will leave it here. However, I would add, albeit in passing, that the way that the tragedy of Gramsci's relationship with Giulia Schucht has been trivialised in recent years, above all in Italy, is nauseating and is enough to deprive this author of the will to continue writing. In the face of such a spectacle, it only remains to repeat the true, if caustic and somewhat melancholy, words written by Valentino Gerratana in 1992: 'When only a simulacrum of culture exists, as is now the case, there cannot be a true dialogue with Gramsci, nor with anyone else.'

When political identity or proximity is superimposed onto an intimate relationship between two people who ascribe the dignity of culture to its function of transforming individuals and real relations, communication between them becomes a complicated matter. Indeed, linguistic precision – the proper use of words – becomes doubly important in the political debate between people who, in the context of the Third International, share the same objectives, but who are obliged to take peremptory decisions on divisions arising between friends and acquaintances, divisions which are undoubtedly complex and thus hard to understand. In such conditions, even the use of humour and irony must be measured.

One of the negative consequences of the Russification of the communist parties of Europe, of which Lenin had already warned at the Fourth Congress

of the Third International, and which was opportunely recalled by Gramsci himself, was that this process required national themes and issues to be understood with different categories, and with different words, owing to the difficulties posed by translation. The division which became established in this period between a 'Russian Marxism' and a so-called 'Western' Marxism had its pre-political origin in the problems of translating a conception of history and of humanity (i.e., the Marxian one) which was developed primarily with the problems of the class struggle in Germany, France and England in mind, and was then transposed into Russian so that it would be intelligible in an ocean of peasants, only to be re-translated from (Leninist) Russian to German, English or Italian.

For an intellectual fairly well acquainted with Marx's work, even for one like Gramsci who greatly appreciated the work of Lenin, this double process of translation and re-translation, to and from Russian, of relatively well-known socio-economic and cultural problems must have been akin to a 'betrayal', given that, to a certain extent, and in this case too, *il traduttore è traditore*.^{12†} When the political controversies of the period from 1924 to 1936 are analysed, it is not often that sufficient attention is paid to a problem which is prior to their political definition, strictly speaking – namely whether Russian, German, Hungarian, Italian, French, Polish or Spanish interlocutors understood the keywords of the discussion in the same sense, with the same meaning. This is to say nothing of the problems arising in this context when, for example, the Chinese revolution is referred to with terms and concepts borrowed from French political language [*lenguaje*] and translated into Russian.

Gramsci was inevitably sensitive to the problem posed here: he devoted some very astute paragraphs of the *Prison Notebooks* to the problem of translatability of linguistic registers [*lenguajes*];¹³ he was keen to dedicate himself to translation; and he had serious communication problems even with his own comrades in prison in discussions on the strategy of the Third International. This could aptly be described as the problem of Babel in the internationalism of the Third International, or of how to construct an intelligible common linguistic form of expression [*lenguaje*] between people of so many different languages [*lenguas*] and nationalities who are aware of two things simultaneously, namely that workers should have no country (as is stated in the *Communist Manifesto*), even though, in actual fact, they do (as was demonstrated in the First World War).

12† 'The translator is a traitor': in undertaking any translation, it is impossible for the translator to be (completely) faithful to the original.

13 Gramsci 1995, pp. 403–4 [Q.11, §48; Q.11, §65].

When Gramsci reflects in prison on the experiences he has had, and on the epoch in which he has happened to live, he realises that one thing is the musicality of speeches, as it were, and another is the concrete translation of what is said in those speeches. In atypical conditions, when certain emotions are aroused, the musicality of speeches makes those who hear them believe that they really understand their content, even if they do not speak the language [*lengua*] in question. Gramsci recalls on one page of the notebooks that, during the First World War, an English, French or Russian speaker could speak in his own language [*lengua*] to an Italian audience (for which these languages [*lenguas*] were incomprehensible) on the excesses perpetrated by the Germans in Belgium, and that, given the wave of sympathy which was generated, this audience not only listened attentively to the speaker, but ‘followed him’ to the point that it could say that it ‘understood him’.¹⁴ Historians say that this is how the First International took root in Spain – with a receptive audience which, through a certain affinity, intuitively understood the expressions used by Fanelli to communicate the suffering and the hardships of the workers in that era.

However, something more than empathy is required, something more than an understanding of the musicality of speeches, for a concrete discussion of the best possible strategy in a specific historical moment, or in order to attempt a detailed analysis of the reasons that a movement with right on its side has been defeated. Here, the problems are multiplied. Gramsci was well aware of this. Political discussions which take place in the context of a *shared language* [*lengua*] are already conditioned by the different levels of comprehension of this language [*lengua*], and these different levels of comprehension, when the type of discussion involves intellectuals, workers and peasants, are in turn conditioned by the *different linguistic registers* [*lenguajes*] used by the different participants within such discussions, and by the different attitudes that they have towards the linguistic register [*lenguaje*] of their interlocutors. Intellectuals use predominantly written language [*lenguaje*], whereas the workers and peasants of the period use spoken language [*lenguaje*]. Gramsci realised that discussions between intellectuals often proceed via rapid allusions, as interlocutors size up each other’s cultural education in order to expedite further progress once they have established that they have a linguistic register [*lenguaje*] in common. However, in Gramsci’s tradition – i.e., Marxist socialism – a prior problem is posed: because discussions are not between professional intellectuals, and there is no given common linguistic register [*lenguaje*], such a linguistic register [*lenguaje*] has to be created, a

14 Gramsci 1985b, p. 123 [Q.23, §7].

shared cultural terrain has to be established, and the right balance between the spoken and written word must be struck.¹⁵

There is no doubt that when Gramsci poses the problem of the translatability of scientific and philosophical linguistic registers [*lenguajes*], what he has in mind is precisely the problem of national traditions in the context of the International, since this reflection is prefaced by a reference to Lenin, according to whom 'we have not managed to "translate" our language [*lengua*] into the European languages [*lenguas*]'.¹⁶ Gramsci gives a pre-political (linguistic, cultural and philosophical) sense to what, in Lenin's case, was a strictly political observation – one which did not concern the translation of words, but the adaptation of strategic concepts. On the theoretical level, Gramsci argues that the conditions for such translatability are present. He contends that a historical phase has been reached in which civilisation acquires a fundamentally identical cultural expression over and above the different linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] and the different traditions which are afforded by each of the national cultures and philosophical systems.¹⁷

This argument presupposes two things. In the first place, it assumes the existence of a common framework, a shared cultural terrain over and above linguistic differences. For Gramsci, history is always 'world history', and even more so in the twentieth century: this implies that particular histories occur and are produced in the framework of world history. For this reason, when he states that grammar can only be comparative, Gramsci relates this comparative quality to the awareness that the linguistic fact, like any other historical fact, cannot have narrowly defined national confines.¹⁸ Alternatively, he relativises the differential national fact based exclusively on languages [*lenguas*]. The second presupposition, which is not stated explicitly in the notes on grammar, but which recurs throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, is the recognition of the existence of a conception of the world – the embryo of a secularised, worldly and internationalising philosophy – which is able to facilitate the comprehension of the sense of particular histories within the context of world history, or within something like a common theoretical framework. Such a common theoretical framework is historical materialism, the philosophy of praxis.

In fact, however, the configuration in daily practice of this shared cultural terrain, of this language [*lenguaje*] which is prefigured as the expression of the epoch, has to continue to overcome various obstacles. One of these is

15 Gramsci 1975, pp. 1901–2 [Q.16, §29].

16 Gramsci 1975, p. 854 [Q.7, §2].

17 Gramsci 1995, p. 307 [Q.11, §47].

18 Gramsci 1995, pp. 181 [Q.29, §2].

precisely the tendency to overemphasise national differences. Echoing the critique of Russification of the communist parties in the *Quaderni del carcere*, Gramsci extends the reflection of the late, self-critical Lenin, ruling out a new 'Napoleonism' (i.e., the extension of revolutionary conquests along the same path that Napoleon followed after the French revolution). Gramsci also calls attention to the necessity of 'nationalising' really existing internationalism, or, in other words, the necessity of acknowledging and evaluating national differences within a shared strategy. He believes that there is something akin to an 'essential content' shared by different cultures (or at least by the European ones, for it is these that he is considering), and that this content can be identified and appropriated for historical-critical purposes.

The analogy that Gramsci establishes in this case between scientific languages [*lenguajes*] and national cultures is suggestive. His argument is the following: in the same way that two scientists who have been trained within the domain of a single fundamental culture can believe that they defend different 'truths', only because they use different linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] in expounding their ideas, so, too, can the belief arise that two national cultures are distinct – these can even present themselves as being opposed and even antagonistic – because they employ the linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] of different traditions, whereas, in actual fact, they are the expression of profoundly similar civilisations. In the face of this exaggerated presentation of differential facts, Gramsci advocates the translatability of linguistic registers [*lenguajes*], in the knowledge that there is no such thing as a perfect translation in this case, just as there is none in the case of languages [*lenguas*] themselves. The theoretical presuppositions of the Gramscian notion of the (relative) translatability of linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] are the internationalist perspective and the idea of progress which the philosophy of praxis shares with the Enlightenment project. Gramsci considered that the real progress of what we call civilisation is produced by all peoples, and although this progress owes much to national impulses, these latter themselves always relate to specific cultural activities or groups of problems, rather than to progress as a whole.¹⁹ As such, once the historical dialectic of identity and difference between cultures has been acknowledged, it remains for the critic of ideas and the historian of social development – and herein lies such a critic's most delicate task – to find 'the real identity beneath the apparent contradiction and differentiation, and . . . the substantial diversity beneath the apparent identity'.²⁰

19 Gramsci 1995, p. 309 [Q.11, §48].

20 Gramsci 1995, pp. 417 [Q.24, §3].

The problem of translating an internationalist strategy shared by workers and intellectuals who speak different languages [*lenguas*] and belong to different nationalities into a common linguistic register [*lenguaje*] already arose in the early years of the First International, in the nineteenth century. This is a matter which cannot only be approached from the perspective of (conscious or spontaneous) class solidarity. A part of the socialist, communist or anarchist movement has behaved since that time as if the statement that 'workers have no country' were a judgement or a sociological proposition, as if it were the result of some survey carried out among representative samples of the world industrial proletariat, when only a little thought is required to see that it is in fact a normative statement, a *desideratum*, something which is aspired to rationally, on the basis of the globalising tendency of capitalism.²¹

Nevertheless, the cultural effects or consequences of this tendency in the socio-economic base of the system are not, nor do they have to be, in one direction only. Marx himself realised the importance of this problem. In an interview that he gave in 1871 to the New York publication, *The World*, he states the following:

The Association does not dictate the form of political movements It is a network of affiliated societies spreading all over the world of labor. In each part of the world, some special aspect of the problem presents itself, and the workmen there address themselves to its consideration in their own way. Combinations among workmen cannot be absolutely identical in detail in Newcastle and in Barcelona, in London and in Berlin. . . . The International does not presume to dictate in the matter and hardly to advise. But to every movement it accords its sympathy and its aid within the limits assigned by its own laws.²²

However, Gramsci goes even further: he transposes the reflection from the political and organisational level an anterior one. This level is that of the possibility of translating different linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] and cultures while simultaneously endeavouring to overcome ethnocentric primitivism and absolute relativism. Thus he criticises both 'philosophical Esperantism' and the 'utopia of fixed, universal languages [*lingue*]' or the 'resistance to the development of a common national language [*lingua*] on the part of the fanatics of international languages [*lingue*]'. Gramsci astutely draws a relation between scientific pragmatism of a positivistic bent and Bukharin's efforts in the *Popular*

21 I deal with this point in Fernández Buey 1999, pp. 154 ff.

22 *New York World*, 18 July 1871.

Manual at the same time as he places them in question, and he critically connects both of these to the persistence of an ethnocentrism which is unable to grasp the historicity of linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] and philosophies, which is the reason for the habitual tendency to consider everything which is not expressed in one's own linguistic register [*lenguaje*] to be delirium, prejudice, or superstition.²³ In this context, furthermore, Gramsci designates a couple of theoretical criteria of great utility for grounding the possibility, as imperfect as it might be, of a reciprocal translatability between languages [*lenguas*] and national cultures of diverse traditions within the philosophy of praxis. These criteria are the following:

- 1.) To elucidate 'doses of criticism and scepticism' with respect to one's own linguistic form of expression [*lenguaje*] (and one's own conception of the world). These 'doses' are necessary for sustaining an alternative culture without becoming paralysed (or demoralising one's comrades) or becoming sectarian.
- 2.) The acceptance, not only as a possibility, but as a reality, of the fact that some cultures are superior to others, although – and this is decisive – they are almost never so in the way which their fanatical, primitive or ethnocentric advocates believe that they are, and, above all, almost never when taken as a whole or a totality.

The third area that is to be studied is that of the repercussions of this preoccupation with language [*lengua*] and linguistic registers [*lenguajes*] in the evolution of Gramsci's political thought. In this regard, it should be noted that although the reflection on the connection between language [*lenguaje*] and politics is not always explicit, Gramsci's originality is due in great part to his desire *to give a new form of expression to a new form of doing politics*. This is a dimension of Gramsci's work which has always been recognised by people from other traditions or other cultures – from the liberal-libertarian Piero Gobetti to the libertarian-anarchist Camillo Berneri, and from Joaquim Maurín in Catalonia to Benedetto Croce in Italy.

In this respect, Gramsci continued the path opened up by Marx when the latter proposed the secularisation of philosophy as a form of the realisation or overcoming of philosophy itself, integrating the problems of suffering humanity and those of thinking humanity within its considerations. Moreover, if, in the Marx of the 1840s, and even more so in the Marx of the 1850s, we already encounter a well-documented journalism, one which is historically and

23 Gramsci 1995, pp. 303–4 [Q.11, §45].

philosophically informed and which has its own critical standpoint, we find an equally original journalistic form in the Gramsci of *L'Ordine Nuovo*: the latter's writing is simultaneously informed, cultured, polemical, problem-oriented and truthful. This is no coincidence. It is due to Gramsci's specific reflection on the alternative culture of the subaltern classes (in dialogue with Angelo Tasca and Amadeo Bordiga, but also with Novalis and Vico) and the importance which he accorded, from his youth onwards, to the search for the best form of the language [*linguaje*] of communication between intellectuals and the people.

This reflection and this quest constitute something of a red thread running through Gramsci's entire work from 1918 to 1935. He fundamentally takes two factors into account in this regard. The first of these is the comparison of the new conception of the world with the history of Christianity and its institutionalisation in the Church; the second is the need for a critique of the vulgarisation of Marxist socialism which tends to treat the subaltern classes as 'laypeople' or 'mere troops'. Gramsci searched for the adequate form for forging a link between leaders and led in the framework of the same tradition (he uses the phrase 'explicit and active worldview') through a single shared language [*linguaje*], and not, as in the Church, through two languages [*lenguajes*]: one for the clergy, and another for laypeople.

In this quest, the dialogical form goes hand in hand with the proposal for a new type of philosopher which he calls a 'democratic philosopher', whose personality is not limited to the cultivation of his own individuality, being oriented instead towards an 'active social relation of transformation of the cultural environment'. This is the Gramscian translation of Marx's secularisation of philosophy. Furthermore, his adaptation to the era of the 'body blow' – to the terrible years of Fascism and Nazism – is expressed in the recognition that it was necessary for him and his contemporaries to proceed, with a certain humility, from feeling like 'ploughmen of history' to considering themselves the 'fertiliser of history'. 'Once', says Gramsci, 'everybody wanted to be a ploughman of history. Nobody wanted to be the "fertiliser" of history. But is it possible to plough before fertilising the soil? Something has changed, because now there are those who adapt themselves philosophically to being fertiliser, who know that this is what they have to be, and who adapt themselves'.²⁴ An alternative politics, one that is critical of politics – all the more so in the bad times – thus has to be above all a *paedagogy*; and the language [*linguaje*] of such an alternative politics has to be a *paedagogical* language [*linguaje*]. Such a *paedagogy* equally excludes the trivialisation of one's own ideas and dilettantism, the

24 Gramsci 1975, p. 1128 [Q.9, §53].

ad hoc incorporation of famous quotations and the interested, simplistic reduction of the arguments of one's adversary. It does not seek to indoctrinate, but to educate, or to enlighten. It is also expressed in a passionate, truthful language [*lenguaje*].

It is this reflection on political paedagogy which leads Gramsci to a consideration of the most appropriate disposition and style for the new era, for this historic phase in which the old has not quite perished and the new has not quite seen the light of day. In the notebooks, there are two further series of notes, which have already been referred to in these essays, which are equally interesting for a consideration of the relation between language [*lenguaje*] and politics, and which I would like to recall here in a little more detail in order to conclude.

The first series refers to the question of young people and has to do with the importance accorded to the intergenerational dialogue in the struggle for hegemony.²⁵ The second series, which also forms part of a dialogue in the context of his own tradition, concerns the most appropriate form for the elaboration of the 'historical bloc' and for the creation of a 'central nexus' between intellectuals and the people.²⁶

Gramsci calls attention on various occasions to the importance of generational ruptures and crises in the struggle for hegemony, as well as to the responsibility which older people, as well as those of all ages, have in this battle. Generational crises have a direct relation to cultural malaise. In these crises it is crucial to find a common language [*lenguaje*] in which people of different ages who aspire to change the world can understand one another and communicate their different lived experiences. Under the heading of 'Fathers and Sons: liberalism and nihilism', Gramsci attempts to frame in positive terms a delicate matter to which Turgenev and Dostoyevsky had dedicated some notable pages. As this continues to be one of the themes of our time, it might be useful to devote a few words here to how Gramsci's concerns might be extended to the present.

Indeed, one of the problems that we now have to confront is that the dialogue between generations is mediated by the trivialisation and manipulation of the history of the twentieth century that has been so triumphantly accomplished by historiographical 'revisionism'. This revisionism has permeated social discourse very deeply and already constitutes an ideology very much functional to the dominant class interests in the epoch of cultural

25 Gramsci 1992b, pp. 212–13; Gramsci 1996b, pp. 114–15; Gramsci 1975, pp. 1717–18 [Q.1, §127; Q.3, §137; Q.14, §58].

26 Gramsci 1975, pp. 2298–302 [Q.26, §5].

homogenisation and uniformisation. So-called postmodernism is, on the cultural level, the most advanced stage of capitalism, and, as John Berger wrote: 'the historic role of capitalism itself . . . is to destroy history, to sever every link with the past, and to orientate all effort and imagination to that which is about to occur.'²⁷

Such has been the way of things, and it remains so. Given that this is true, we have to offer an alternative to the traditional chronological grand narrative to young people, who have been brought up in a culture of fragmentary images, so that they can take an interest in what Marx and Gramsci stood for, what they did, and in the Marxist socialist tradition. What is needed, then, is an alternative which, in short, is capable of using fragmentary images to restore the idea of the continuing centrality of the class struggle in our epoch between the *chiaroscuro* of the tragedy of the twentieth century. Gramsci directed his attention to theatre, popular literature, poetry and narrative. Moreover, he considered the importance of the (oral and written) word for the expression of different worldviews and for the elaboration of a historical grand narrative. These reflections deserve to be extended. It is likely that, in our time, the most appropriate language [*lenguaje*] for opening a dialogue between generations in the context of the emancipatory traditions is an alternative use of cinematographic and visual techniques, combining historical documentation and reasoned passion.

I would like to conclude by considering the question of style in the new form of doing politics. There is a reflection by Gramsci, contained in a note written in 1935 on 'the contradictions of historicism and their literary expressions', which, in my opinion, summarises very well the lesson on style which Gramsci wished to leave us. This reflection deals with irony and sarcasm as stylistic forms, which were questions which exercised Gramsci from the first notebooks that he wrote in prison. His last formulation of these questions is extremely suggestive and of much relevance for the present day.

Gramsci writes that irony can be the correct form in order to express the position of those individual intellectuals who do not have immediate responsibilities in the construction of a cultural world, and it can also be adopted in order to manifest the distance of the artist from the affective content of his creation. This is the form in which the intellectual or the artist emphasises that he feels, but does not share (or that he shares, but in a more refined intellectual manner) what he makes his creatures – the products of his imagination – say or do. In the case of action taken from a historical perspective, however, when the intention is to engage in political pedagogy, irony is no more than

27 Berger 1999, p. xxvi.

a literary device which is markedly intellectualist and which expresses, by contrast, a sceptical or dilettantish detachment which will be interpreted as a consequence of disillusionment or weariness, or as the pretension of being above what is being concretely discussed, of being beyond good and evil. In this case, where political paedagogy is the aim, Gramsci considers that the most adequate stylistic form is not irony, but sarcasm, and emphatically a positive, creative sarcasm, through which the person speaking or writing expresses his understanding with regard to popular illusions, but at the same time his distance, with a reasonable detachment, from what he judges to be mere *chimera*, simple fantasy, mere longing for a world which is long gone and which is idealised, or from the mechanical repetition of 'eternal principles'.²⁸

Gramsci makes a clear distinction between this 'passionate sarcasm' and a reactive, anti-humanist sarcasm, which is rarely passionate, which always presents itself as negative, and which, as such, contributes to the destruction not only of the contingent form, but also of the very human content of the sentiments and beliefs of the subaltern classes. He was not interested in sarcasm as a specific, crystallised language [*lenguaje*] or as the kind of jargon which ends up infecting the subaltern classes with a vulgar cynicism. Rather, he was interested in innovation within the framework of popular traditions, and the search for a new form in which to reconfigure the living and healthy core of the beliefs and aspirations of the people. For this very reason, he counterposes the passionate, positive sarcasm, which Marx appears to have inherited from Jonathan Swift, to the apodeictic or sermonising form which sometimes prevails even amongst the 'collective intellectual' as a form of communication with the subaltern classes. Passionate sarcasm, which deals a blow the class adversary, thus presents itself as the expressive form of a theoretical and practical aspiration which, at first sight, can seem internally contradictory: to have a feeling and an understanding for popular beliefs without sharing illusions or optimistic sentiments which have no basis in things as they are in reality. For Gramsci, the presence of the element of passion is the discriminatory criterion which enables us to distinguish when sarcasm is merely a vacuous gesture, and when it goes hand in hand with sincerity, with truthfulness, with profound convictions.²⁹

Gramsci very seldom writes with sarcasm in the *Prison Notebooks*. However, we know from the testimony of those who were in prison in Turi with him that he habitually used this form of expression in his political discussions with party comrades on the strategy of the Communist International and on the

28 Gramsci 1975, p. 2300 [Q.26, §5].

29 Gramsci 1975, p. 2301 [Q.26, §5].

question of how to overcome Fascism in Italy. Moreover, taking into account the problems which this created for him in his relationships towards the end of 1930, it is not strange that he let himself be exercised by the problem of an adequate justification for passionate sarcasm as a form of political paedagogy. In fact, his final reflection on this matter ought, in all probability, to be regarded not only as a measured response to the illusions of his comrades (illusions that he himself had a 'feeling' for, but whose form he did not share, unrealistic as they were), but also as a self-justification. For the tendency to sarcastic expression was a feature of Gramsci's character from his youth onwards, and, furthermore, there are various instances of his irascibility (some of which are grievous and uncalled for) in his correspondence with people that he loved.

If this hypothesis were well-founded, we would have to conclude that Gramsci ultimately understood all too well the risk that intellectuals run when they make use of irony and sarcasm from a privileged standpoint in their communication with those who have nothing, or hardly anything (and who, of course, are illiterate). He was not so able to appreciate, on the other hand, the negative consequences which follow from the transposition of these expressive forms into the sphere of private communication and intimate relations. This ultimately leaves Gramsci's reflections on language and politics open to a further kind of consideration relating to the question of emotional intelligence.³⁰ Gramsci had an intuition of such considerations, but was unable to develop them himself.

30† Fernández Buey reprises the title of this chapter in this sentence. See the corresponding note, above, on the translation of *lengua* and *lenguaje*.

Brecht, 'To Those Born Later'

To Those Born Later

I

Truly, I live in dark times!
The guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet had
The terrible news.

What kind of times are they, when
A talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
That man there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?

It is true I still earn my keep
But, believe me, that is only an accident. Nothing
I do gives me the right to eat my fill.
By chance I've been spared. (If my luck breaks, I am lost.)

They say to me: Eat and drink! Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink if I snatch what I eat
From the starving, and
My glass of water belongs to one dying of thirst?
And yet I eat and drink.

I would also like to be wise.
In the old books it says what wisdom is:
To shun the strife of the world and to live out
Your brief time without fear
Also to get along without violence
To return good for evil
Not to fulfill your desires but to forget them

Is accounted wise.
All this I cannot do:
Truly, I live in dark times.

II

I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger reigned there.
I came among men in a time of revolt
And I rebelled with them.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

My food I ate between battles
To sleep I lay down among murderers
Love I practised carelessly
And nature I looked at without patience.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

All roads led into the mire in my time.
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers.
There was little I could do. But those in power
Sat safer without me: that was my hope.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

III

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember

When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.

For we went forth, changing our country more frequently than our shoes
Through the class warfare, despairing
That there was only injustice and no outrage.
And yet we knew:
Even the hatred of squalor
Distorts one's features.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow hoarse. We
Who wished to lay the foundation for gentleness
Could not ourselves be gentle.
But you, when at last the time comes
That man can aid his fellow man,
Should think upon us
With leniency.

BERTOLT BRECHT (translated from the German original by John Willett, Ralph
Manheim & Erich Fried).¹

1 Brecht 1987, p. 318.

Guide to Reading Gramsci¹

Writings Prior to the Arrest and Imprisonment of Antonio Gramsci (1913–26)

Cronache torinesi, 1913–1917, edited by S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).

La città futura, 1917–1918, edited by S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).

Il nostro Marx, 1918–1919, edited by S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1984).

L'Ordine Nuovo, 1919–1920, edited by V. Gerratana and A.A. Santucci (Turin: Einaudi, 1987).

Socialismo e fascismo (L'Ordine Nuovo, 1921–1922) (Turin: Einaudi, 1968).

La costruzione del partito comunista (1923–1926) (Turin: Einaudi, 1968).

La questione meridionale, edited by Franco de Felice and Valentino Parlato (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974).

Editions of the *Prison Notebooks* (1919–35)

Quaderni del carcere, critical edition of the Gramsci Institute, edited by Valentino Gerratana, in four volumes (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), reprinted in 2001. Spanish translation: *Cuadernos de la cárcel* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1981–2000).

The thematic edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*, published by Einaudi between 1948 and 1951 (which is still in print) comprises: *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*; *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*; *Il Risorgimento*; *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo Stato moderno*; *Letteratura e vita nazionale* and *Passato e Presente*.

A Spanish translation of the thematic edition exists, published in Buenos Aires by Editorial Lautaro and Ediciones Nueva Visión between 1952 and 1975.

1 This guide to further reading, even though it is not principally oriented to an English-speaking readership, is reproduced here for its bibliographical interest in relation to the literature on Gramsci.

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The discrepancies which have arisen since 1991 over the criteria for the new critical edition of the *Quaderni* have ultimately had the effect of paralysing the work of the commission established for this purpose by the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage. In March 2000 the President of the Commission for a National Edition, Renato Zangheri, resigned. [Cf. Renato Zangheri, 'Perché dimetto dalla Commissione nazionale', interview by Bruno Gravagnuolo in *L'Unità*, March 31, 2000.]

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- Lepre, A., *Il prigioniero. Vita di Antonio Gramsci* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 1998). [This work takes advantage of the new documentation published in the last three decades, in particular in relation to the last years of Gramsci's life.]
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2 In English, see Haug 2007, pp. 143–60.

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The IGS was constituted in 1989 through the initiative of a group of Gramsci scholars (Buttigieg, Cammett, Rosengarten, Baratta, Liguori, et al.) at the international conference held in Formia, Italy. There are branches of the IGS in Italy, the USA, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and various European countries. The IGS publishes annual updates on the international bibliography on Gramsci. John Cammett's Gramsci bibliography and the annual updates can also be accessed via <http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/>.

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